

Star Wars: Marooned

A Novella
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Chapter 1

Something wet dripped on Serrin's face. It annoyed him, but he was too far away to wipe it from his forehead. He floated in darkness, so it seemed, and the distant hum in his ears scratched at him. Breathing was difficult, and he felt like he was going to suffocate. Serrin struggled upward through the darkness. He knew he was close to panic, but he had to keep control. Time was passing quickly, and soon he would be unable to wake up.

That was when he slammed back into himself, aware, he tried to open his swollen eyes, but they felt glued closed. He reached up with his hand close to his body and felt his eyes. They were covered in hardened gel.

Another drop hit him on the top part of his forehead and rolled down. He felt like screaming for an instant, but he quickly choked it back down his sore throat. He lifted his other hand to help the other in freeing his eyes. He tore the visual probes from the gel and wiped the hardened substance away as best he could for the moment.

When he first opened his eyes he could not see, but his eyes focused after a few moments and took in the tiny bit of light coming from across the compartment. The glass in front of him was cracked, and condensation gathered at the top of the cryocell. It was very cold on the outside of the glass. Serrin was disoriented. What was going on? The glass of the cryocell was not supposed to be cracked, nor was it supposed to be cold. Something was wrong.

Serrin tried to remember if the cryocell had an emergency release on the inside of the tube. After feeling around, he realized there was nothing. Why would an Imperial prisoner need an emergency release anyway? The walls of the cryocell were too close for him to break the glass in front of his nose. There was barely any room for him to get his hands up by his face. He kept the oxygen respirator on, and calmed his racing mind.

The man turned inward, feeling the calm and peace, he imagined the outside the cryocell designed to hold prisoners in cryogenic sleep for interstellar travel. Letting his mind move over its surface, he found the controls to the opening mechanism. He remembered where they were seeing them before he was placed into stasis. Using his mind he imagined pushing the controls. Long moments ticked by in silence. Then the controls came to life.

A weak alarm sounded with a yellow flashing light on top of the cryocell, but it quickly wobbled and died. A woman's voice spoke, "Emergency. Cryocell 2 released." As the voice spoke it became slower and slower, and the yellow light dimmed until both quit from lack of power. Servo motors

whirred to life and the hatch of the cryocell began to lift upward. Halfway up it halted.

The frigid air hit Serrin's naked body causing him to inhale short, quick gasps. The air must have been below freezing. He pulled the medical sensors off of his chest, out of his ears, and the respirator off his nose and mouth. He pulled the holding straps off of his waist and legs. He slid out of the cryocell to his knees on the cold floor. Serrin could not get his breathing to stabilize.

The freed prisoner looked around at his surroundings and noticed two prostrate Imperial Stormtroopers lying on the floor down the hall of the prisoner cellblock. The man's survival instincts kicked in, he lifted himself up and stumbled their direction.

With each step, he had to peel his foot from the cold floor. When he reached them, he worked the white armor off of the one that looked closer to his size. He removed the armor and pulled the black body suit from the frozen body. The man was dead, but the freezing temperatures kept his body from deteriorating.

Serrin put on the black environment suit then he quickly fixed the armor into place. After pulling on the Stormtrooper's boots, he put on the helmet. He checked the suit's power systems and noticed the suit's energy was 53% full. Thankful, he switched on the environment controls and set it for sub-freezing temperatures. Immediately the suit warmed Serrin's body. He felt dizzy and sat down against the wall of the cellblock and breathed in warm filtered air for quite a while.

When his mind began to clear, he began considering his situation. Serrin switched on the helmet's dark vision

capabilities and looked around. The small lights on medical and other consoles glowed brighter and he was able to see clearly to the other end of the long hall filled with cryocells. Serrin picked up the blaster rifle lying next to the now stripped trooper, and he took all the extra energy packs and clips he could find off the other one. For the moment, the freed prisoner would live and was equipped.

Serrin moved to the beginning of the cryocell row and noticed the majority of them were offline. Their occupants were frozen corpses like the two fallen Stormtroopers. There were three others operational and undamaged, but who could tell how long their emergency power would last before shutting down. He did not even know how long he had remained in stasis. The freed man could not tell much about the occupants of the operational cryocells because the glass was covered in a thick layer of frost. It was warm inside the tubes.

The prisoner returned to where the fallen Stormtroopers were and examined the door. It looked operational. He needed to get outside into the rest of the ship and find out what was going on. Serrin could not feel any familiar vibrations of the engines in hyperspace or traveling at sublight speeds. He could not feel anything at all. The ship's engines must be down. Main power must be inoperative as well because the cryocells were under their own emergency power. Yet, the gravity generators were still functioning, so the ship must have some power. Life support was offline though because the temperatures were below freezing.

Serrin went to the door and opened the manual override panel next to it. He extended the handle, twisted the grip into place and began to crank. After a few tense moments, his

muscles straining, the door slowly began to open. Air hissed into the room as the pressure equalized. As soon as Serrin got it open wide enough for him to fit he stepped through and out of the cell block.

The echo of the creaking doors finally stopped, and the quiet returned. The cellblock opened into a large guardroom with many consoles, cameras, and a heavy shielded open door at the opposite side. The metal plates of the floor were black just like the hall Serrin had just exited. Five bodies were laying on the floor, Imperial Prison Guards, in their black outfits and huge bulky helmets. Limbs and heads were twisted at wrong angles, and dry blood covered parts of their bodies. They looked to have slammed into the bulk heads.

Serrin started across the room when he grew very dizzy and wobbled in his steps. He quickly gripped the nearest console and breathed in deeply. He had cryogenic sickness in its low level stages. That was not a good sign, some time must have passed. Serrin grew nauseous, but after a few moments it subsided. He continued on a bit more slowly across the room. If there was anyone still alive on this ship, he was caught by the surveillance system. The game would be up soon.

With blaster raised and ready, Serrin stepped through the doorway at the far end of the guardroom. Cold and darkness met him. He switched his stormtrooper helmet over to battle status and proceeded to his left. The deck was uneven, and looked as if a great earthquake had hit the section. Jagged pieces of metal protruded from the floor, and wires hung loose from the ceiling. This ship had been through a tremendous battle to sustain this type of damage. Serrin approached a set of closed blast doors. His helmet picked up micro fractures

throughout the metal. The controls were melted. His only choice was to turn around and head the other direction.

The only sound he heard was the sound of his boots on the deck plates. He was glad minimum power was operational, but how long it would last was another question. His first objective, if no one was alive on the ship, was to reach the engineering section. He might be able to get some power systems repaired if he could get there.

The freed prisoner moved down the corridor as quietly as possible. He peeked around a corner to see an unsettling site. Littering the juncture were multiple bodies, shredded in different ways by some type of explosion. A huge hole in the bulkhead revealed a view of space outside the ship. A dim, atmosphere integrity field glowed over the gouge in the hull. If there were many of these, Serrin figured out why the life support was down in this area. Any remaining power was being drained to keep the atmosphere inside the ship, and by the look of the field it would not hold long.

The seriousness of Serrin's situation gnawed at him. If internal power failed completely, which he figured the remaining power systems were close to collapse he would be dead. The ship would become a hollow tomb, devoid of any survivable environment. A feeling of panic threatened to overwhelm the prisoner. He had to move quickly. Choking down wild emotions, Serrin bolted across the juncture. It did not matter if anyone was left, he had to get to engineering and commence repairs. He ran as safely as he could down dark corridors, through rubble-strewn junctures, and climbed hazardous ladders.

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A huge set of black, heavy doors blocked Serrin's entrance into the main engineering section of the ship. He stepped over to the manual release and prepared to open the doors. He began cranking the handle with great difficulty. The doors fought him every inch. Just as a crack opened in the doors, Serrin realized his mistake. These were pressure doors. A great suction began thrumming through the crack in between the doors. Serrin cursed as he was lifted off his feet. It took all his strength to hang on to the long crank handle. If he were to let go, he would be sucked through the one-inch crack to his death. Debris pelted him from every direction in their flight.

The seconds passed and Serrin's strength began to wane. He released his right hand and attempted to grab the base of the crank. He was successful. His hand gripped the crank with renewed vigor. Using all his might, he began cranking the door closed. Two rotations later, the doors closed. Again his feet touched the floor, but not as quickly as they should have touched down.

"The power to the gravity generators must be failing," he thought. "I don't have much time left." Serrin stood there, thinking. If he could not get to the engineering deck, then he was doomed. He noticed that the hair on the back of his neck began to prickle. In the silence, he thought he heard something. The prisoner turned and looked down the hall, but there was nothing there, only darkness and a few blinking lights. He turned back the other direction; again there was nothing.

Serrin calmed himself and returned his thoughts to the task at hand. If this way was exposed to space, that did not

necessarily mean that the entire section was open. The Imperials were masters at capital ship design, and they designed their engineering sections to withstand the battles they would surely fight. Each important element was housed in its own area with the ability to be sealed in such an emergency. Serrin thought, trying to remember the layout of the Imperial Victory II Class Star Destroyers. With a start, he remembered a way and immediately moved through the darkness.

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With a sigh of relief, Serrin could see through the maintenance tube hatch view port, the section was sealed. He worked the opening mechanism and slid out to the floor. The smell of chemicals drifted around him. The cavernous room housed one of the huge sized power generators. This was the only engineering area that was not exposed to space. Something had blasted a huge section out of the hull of the Star Destroyer and much of engineering was missing. With a quick look around, Serrin could not see anyone. A few steps later, he spied a figure lying close to the power output screen of an auxiliary power monitor.

With his blaster ready, he approached. The dehydrated, rotting body of an engineer greeted him. The man was lying next to an open port, tools strewn around him. This engineer must have been the one to keep the auxiliary power systems operational for so long. Serrin realized this man was his survival. Without him, the ship's power would have completely failed, and he would have been unable to get to this point. He would have been a frozen corpse as he floated from a lack of

gravity in the cryocell area. Serrin took a moment to contemplate his work. The open port and the tools laying about helped Serrin realize the man must have been working on getting the last power generator operational.

Serrin noticed a heap of emergency rations by one wall, but there was no water in sight. That was the result of the man's death. It looked like the engineer used this section as his living quarters as well as his work place. An emergency blanket by the rations drew Serrin's attention. The engineer had been here for quite some time, and the depleted power system in the man's black body suit confirmed Serrin's suspicions.

The freed prisoner walked to the auxiliary power display and began to read. The ship was not running on auxiliary power. According to the display, the auxiliary power had failed three days earlier. The remaining power in the energy storage units read half a percent. The engineer must have selfishly shut down life support to every area of the ship except this one at the beginning of the disaster. That was the reason the Stormtroopers in the prison area had frozen.

Serrin wondered how many survivors had frozen to death. The engineer must have been conserving as much power as possible to save him. Life support included the gravity generators and the atmosphere integrity fields. The engineer could not partially shut those systems down in different areas of the ship because the computer systems had been damaged. Any other survivors were lucky since he had to keep the systems operational over the entire ship to keep himself in place with an atmosphere to breath.

Serrin removed his helmet to warm air, but the air was tainted with the smell of death. The freed prisoner put his

helmet back on, and went to work getting rid of the dead, decaying body. The man had been an Imperial enlisted man. Serrin did not have much time left. The ship's remaining power was almost gone, so he had to act quickly to survive.

After dumping the body in an out of the way area in the section, Serrin returned to continue the work where the engineer left off. He was going to make the most of what he had left. Every second was precious, and any wasted time could mean certain death.

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Serrin took in two deep breaths. He could see his haggard features on the shiny surface of the power generator. His short brown hair was twisted every direction, some strands hanging down over his forehead. His deep green eyes were blood shot, and his face unshaven. He was definitely not presentable to anyone at the moment.

He had worked for hours on what was left of the smaller auxiliary power generators in the section. The prisoner had to use the breathing exercises to calm his nerves as he worked. The walls were closing in on him as each second passed. Sweat dotted his forehead as he took in another breath and calmed his nerves. He only had a tenth of percent of power left in the power storage units. If this didn't work, he was going to die.

The freed prisoner closed his eyes, hoped for the best, and initiated the power up sequence. For the past several hours, the creaking of the ship echoed down long corridors due to atmosphere integrity fields failing all over the ship. As each tenth of a percent of power was used, more and more fields

collapsed. Serrin was nervous and had begun to get paranoid. He felt like he was being watched from every corner and shadow. He would not be able to keep going much longer if his repairs failed.

The power up sequence continued then it paused. Hesitation was not good! Serrin waited, gritted his teeth, and waited some more. Five minutes later he was cursing his bad luck. Then almost miraculously the sequence continued. A huge sigh of relief left the freed prisoner's lips when the generators powered up. Three of the five small generators came to life, one was only working at half capacity, and the last one started to make grinding noises. Serrin raced over to it and slammed his hand down on the emergency shutdown button.

He pulled the starboard port open to find the problem. Whoever had been working on it had not tightened the injector unit into place. After tightening everything back up, he returned to the auxiliary power console and fired up the final generator. Serrin's fears were correct, the grinding had damaged the unit, and it was only working at ten percent efficiency. The prisoner decided that was better than zero.

Serrin turned off his emergency light unit as the lights in the room slowly illuminated the darkness. He placed the light next to his helmet and walked over to the systems console. The screens came to life, and Serrin began to assess the status of the ship. A diagram of the ship opened, and Serrin gasped as seeing the damage to the vessel. The Victory II Star Destroyer, Vengeance, looked as if it had been torn to pieces from bow to stern. The front third of the ship was nothing but tatters, and only part of the super structure remained. It looked like the tip of the ship had been disintegrated by weapons fire.

The freed prisoner watched as the computer systems came back online, and listened as the wobbly, static filled, deep voice of the computer began reading off the damage report. Atmosphere integrity fields began to immediately charge back to peak levels, and life support was boosted back to its normal status. But, life support was only working in the vital areas that Serrin had expected the engineer would have needed. A wave of lightly heated air washed over Serrin's face as he read and listened to the reports. Then the computer requested security clearance.

Serrin pulled out the engineer's pass card and swiped it in the waiting reader. The remaining sensors, communications, weapons, and shielding systems began scrolling across the screen. The ship had almost none of its sensing capabilities, communications were down (internal and external), and weapons and shielding were offline. There was not much left working on the ship. Huge gashes and holes marred the gray exterior, and the bridge tower looked like it was heavily damaged. Both of its shield generators were torn and twisted chunks of shattered metal.

The docking bay was damaged as well, and Serrin could not get much information on it because the area was too heavily damaged. Although it was damaged, Serrin had hope that there were some ships still operational. He was trying to stay positive. The external bays were probably shattered, but the deep storage bays were probably not too bad. There were no escape pods and no fighters listed, but he hoped a small shuttle or something had survived the battle. Hope above hope, he looked for a listing of his ship, but he did not find any.

The star charts, sub light engines, hyper drive, and navigation were down, but the limited external sensors showed him a graveyard of rubble in the immediate area. A harsh looking planet was listed as being nearby, but it could not support any life. Serrin had no idea where he was, what system he was in, or the nearest possible help. He could not communicate with anyone, nor could he send out a distress signal. Serrin was marooned on a dead ship, shrouded by the blackness of space around him.

Chapter 2

The hatch to the bridge of the Vengeance slowly opened and Serrin let his blaster lead the way. The bridge was littered with debris of all kinds, and five of the forward view ports were sealed with dark steel that had slid into place when they had been penetrated by weapons fire. The bridge was a mess, bodies lay strewn and twisted over burned out consoles. Serrin made his way across to the remaining view ports. The ship's damage on the sensors was bad enough, but to visually see the damage mocked the remaining moments of Serrin's life. It was a miracle he had survived.

The ship was only one piece of junk in a vast debris field. Large chunks of blasted star ships floated in orbit above a harsh looking planet, a gas giant. Serrin was troubled by the Rebel Alliance wrecks he could identify as well.

Another planetoid lay just off the ship's starboard bow. A large, lush green moon promised a better life for the stranded, freed prisoner. The sensors on that side of the ship must have not been operating correctly. Serrin might as well have been

looking at the moon from the other side of the galaxy. If he could not find a way off of this tomb, he would be a part of its memorial to whatever battle had taken place.

Serrin contemplated the situation and headed toward the communication station. As he approached, he dragged a turned over deck chair with him and set it in front of the console. Fortunately, the console was still operational. His mind wandered as he attempted to pull up any type of information that survived. As he waited for the data to appear he remembered his capture.

* * * * *

Serrin was supposed to meet up with a contact, and then meet with some Rebel operatives. His small group of rebel pirates was working a mysterious Imperial supply line when Vice Admiral Sturdin and the traitorous Torlock had drawn them into a trap. His Aeridian battle cruiser had been completely disabled by Torlock's sabotage, a bounty hunter working for the Vice Admiral.

Torlock had spent a lot of time earning the Captain's trust. Captain Serrin Ziehn had called for full shields and weapons when the fleet of Star Destroyers led by the Vengeance had appeared out of hyperspace. Their Interdictor Star Destroyer immediately threw up its gravity wells to keep them from escaping. As the defense officer onboard Serrin's ship reached for his console, huge explosions ripped through the battle cruiser.

The damage reports rolled into the bridge like a wave. The officer on sensors reported a small-unauthorized ship

leaving the docking bay. Captain Ziehn immediately recognized the ship as Torlock's. The bounty hunter had betrayed him and Serrin's people to the Imperial dogs.

Sturdin's smiling, sarcastic voice came over the comm system and demanded Captain Ziehn's complete surrender. His answer was a partial salvo of torpedoes that decimated one of Vice Admiral Sturdin's support ships that strayed within range. That was all Serrin's ship had power to do. The weapons systems went completely offline.

Then all the power went dead as another set of explosions sounded. Torlock must have wired the ship well with his intimate knowledge of the capital ship's systems. The emergency minimum power systems kicked in and Serrin's feet again touched the floor. He immediately slammed his hand down on the internal comm system. "All hands, this is the Captain, abandon ship, I repeat, abandon ship. There is a fleet of Star Destroyers closing on our position. Rendezvous at our designated coordinates."

Serrin leapt from his command chair, hit a few buttons on his console and ran for the rear blast doors along with the rest of his command crew. "Get to your ships and get out of here." As his crew headed out, he stopped at the weapons console. His fingers flew across the controls.

The computer's female voice spoke, "Auto destruct sequence armed, please enter authorization code."

"S. Ziehn, Captain, Code 0931FB1T32-421."

"Authorization code accepted," the computer said in response. "Please enter time until self-destruct."

Serrin paused a moment, and looked out the forward viewpoints. Three of the Imperial Victory class Star Destroyers were closing in for the kill. “Set time for 10 minutes.”

The computer paused as the calculations locked in. “Auto destruct sequence set,” it said, “ten minutes until final detonation.”

Sirens sounded throughout the ship as the computer began counting down to the moment when the ship would explode. Serrin hoped the enemy ships would be in range of the blast. He looked again. The Star Destroyers were closing fast. Serrin dashed for the rear doors to the bridge and activated his comlink. “Tesh, this is Serrin, prep the ship for launch.”

A metallic voice replied, “Yes, Captain, the ship will be ready at your arrival.”

Serrin charged down the corridors of his beloved ship. The thought of never seeing his bridge again pierced him, but he had a job to do. The Rebellion must be kept alive, and his crew was part of the Rebellion. Ships can be replaced, people cannot.

Friends and coworkers headed for their ships, sending words of encouragement and loyalty to their Captain. As Serrin entered the landing bay, he watched as X-Wings and A-Wings began to launch. Shuttlecraft and personal craft lifted up and followed. Serrin bolted aboard the Aeridian Flame and closed the hatch behind him. He pushed a button on the comm display next to the hatch, “Tesh, get us out of here! Be ready for battle when we exit the bay, we will be fighting for our lives.”

“Confirmed,” the metallic voice said.

Serrin sprinted for his ship’s cockpit. The blast doors opened and he quickly got to his chair. Tesh S5R, Serrin’s droid

swiveled his head to look at the Captain and then back to his console. He was bringing the ship up and prepared to launch from the co-pilot's station. Serrin took the controls and blasted out of the docking bay, he needed as much speed as he could get. "Tesh open a comlink to the cruiser's computer."

Tesh connected them to the cruiser. "Nine seconds to destruct, eight, seven, six..."

Serrin checked his distance and pushed the craft to its maximum sub-light speed. The ship was the newest Aeridian design and fast; the cockpit was central and forward, with the rest of the ship to each side and behind. The body was wide and sleek with powerful engines.

A cloud of TIE fighters was moving towards the pirate group as they raced away from the dieing cruiser. Serrin thought of the cruiser's final moments, she had been a good ship. The computer countdown was coming to a close, "three, two, one. Countdown complete."

Space lit up as the cruiser exploded. The explosion was not a regular explosion, but an exploding shock wave. Serrin's people designed their ship's self-destruct capabilities to send out a destructive wave just for that purpose. The wave erupted from the cruiser in a sphere of bright, angry red and blue energy. The lead Victory Star Destroyer could not react fast enough to avoid it. As it turned the blast broadsided the ship. Its port shields buckled under the weight of the energy. The ship was pursuing the fleeing rebels and had gotten under two units in distance to the disabled cruiser. The Victory erupted into flames and tore apart as the wave engulfed it. The wave continued on. The other two Victories closing stopped and met

the wave head on. They were two and a half units in distance and sustained damage but were not disabled.

The blast quickly dissipated beyond three units of space, and it did not reach the main bulk of Sturdin's fleet. His Victory II, the Vengeance, sat in the rear of the attack group with a smug confidence. Serrin tried to imagine the look on Vice Admiral Sturdin's face when his prey exploded. He would be furious.

The wave approached the fleeing fighters and shuttle groups, but dissipated to harmless energy by the time it reached them. The ships rocked slightly, but nothing more. Serrin checked his sensors and found roughly a third of the tie fighters had been destroyed during the blast. He smiled and signaled his fighter groups, "This is Black leader, all ships prepare to attack that Interdictor. We have to destroy it before we can get out of here. Prepare to reverse course on my mark."

Serrin's remaining ships had been heading directly away from the coming fighters to draw them into the blast radius of the cruiser. The ploy had worked quite well. Thirty seconds later Serrin hit his comm switch. "All ships attack that fighter screen, reverse course."

The long line of shuttles, fighters, freighters, and personal craft came around and headed directly for the incoming, scorched TIE fighter group pursuing them. In a few moments Serrin spoke, "Tesh weapons!" The familiar sound of the Flame's weapon arrays began pounding TIE fighters. A storm of green and red energy bolts slashed through space.

X-wings danced in their flight avoiding the TIE's first round of shots. The groups broke into a vicious dogfight. The rest of the pirate group did their best to keep up and swat TIEs

when they could. Serrin's craft roared in behind two TIEs going after an A-wing. "Lock on to the leader, fire." A gold beam shot out from the Flame and struck the support pylon between the TIE's cockpit and wing. The beam sliced through it easily. Red bolts of energy blasted the cockpit apart. Serrin smiled at the destruction caused by the Aeridian weapon systems. The ship's weapons chewed the other tie in seconds.

"Thanks Black leader!" He heard the pilot of the A-wing say.

"Stay on my wing, seven, we have a job to do."

"Yes, Sir. On your wing."

The pounding of the Fire's weapons comforted Serrin as he flew, and the explosions caused by those weapons brought retribution each time against the Empire for his people. Remembering the nearly complete destruction of his home world by experimental weapons sickened him. They had destroyed the atmosphere of his home world in punishment for joining the Rebellion. The planet was barely habitable. Along with Alderaan, the little known world of Aeridia had been destroyed by the tyranny of the Empire's greed. Only a few battle cruisers remained of a once large, proud fleet, and they had finally destroyed one of those by treacherous betrayal.

As the pirate group finished off the last of the TIE fighters, Serrin was pleased Sturdin's obsession with his capture caused them to lose the majority of their fighter squadrons they had launched. A list of his lost pilots scrolled across his screen. Clenching his jaw for a few moments he clicked on the comm. "Black groups Gamma and Zeta, form up on my in line, we are going to hit that Interdictor with all we have, follow me."

The fighters and the rest of the pirate group followed the Flame forward, in a course through the rest of Sturdin's fleet. The enemy fleet was too slow and spread out to catch them as they moved at full throttle around and through them. The Victories ineffectively fired at the pirate group as they attempted to maneuver to intercept them. Serrin set a course directly for Sturdin's command ship.

Sturdin was really a coward, one who had gotten a command by immoral means. At the last moment, Serrin was going to dive underneath the Star Destroyer, just out of range, and go after the Interdictor that was off to the lower left by itself. Once it was destroyed, the pirates had a clear line of escape on the other side.

Just as Serrin guessed, Sturdin's ship began slowly inching upward. It started firing before the fighters even got in range. "What a fool," Serrin thought as he altered his course and directed it to the Interdictor. The pirate group curved downward and away from Sturdin's ship.

Tesh spoke, "Sir, the enemy fleet is turning our direction in pursuit. We will not have much time before they get us in range when we reach the Interdictor."

"We will have to take our chances," Serrin said, "keep an eye on them."

"Confirmed," Tesh replied.

As the pirates approached the Interdictor, Serrin addressed his battle group, "Team, we need to knock out that ship as soon as we can. Spread out and fire torpedoes at will. Concentrate your fire on the command tower. If we can knock it out, we may buy some time to finish her off." Black group

confirmed the Captain's orders and began spreading out in an attack line.

The first set of pirate torpedoes launched in a dazzling display of blue fire. The second and third launches followed the first. "Sir," Tesh said, "we have four more squadrons of tie fighters in pursuit."

Serrin glanced at his radar and gritted his teeth seeing the readout. "Estimated time until range?"

"Twenty-three seconds," Tesh replied.

"Black Gamma," Serrin said, "we have fighters coming in. Keep at the Interdictor until the last possible moment."

Serrin noticed something else; the Star Destroyers were angling out to their flanks, in a hammer maneuver from each side. Coming up behind was the Vengeance and two other Victories. They had nine remaining ships, two of those lightly damaged. Serrin was mildly surprised that Vice Admiral Sturdin had gotten so much support.

As his pirate group engaged the Interdictor its shields were crumbling from the torpedo hits, but a cloud of tie fighters erupted from its opposite side. A trap was sprung. There were five squadrons of TIEs and their green fire drove the pirates apart. "Black group, keep at the Interdictor, we have to get out of here!" Serrin ordered.

When the other groups of TIEs arrived the Interdictor's shields were collapsing. Then the something happened that made Serrin's blood chill. A huge Star Destroyer, an Imperial II class appeared just opposite the pirates on the other side of the Interdictor. It flashed out of hyperspace in a blur. As soon as it was oriented it opened fire and TIE interceptors roared out of its bays.

“Black group, disable the Interdictor now!” Serrin ordered. “Tesh, hit that Interdictor with everything we have!” Blue ion energy from every angle struck at the Interdictor. Blue electrical discharges rippled over its hull and into its power systems. Its engines went down and its weapons ceased firing. The ship’s gravity wells failed, and the sensors of the pirates confirmed they could escape.

“Retreat!” Serrin ordered. “All ships retreat!” The pirate battle group shot away in all directions.

Serrin became keenly aware of his situation when the TIE fighters did not follow the others, but as one they seemed to turn towards him and the Flame. “We have a problem,” Tesh said.

“I can see that, evasive maneuvers!” Serrin barked as he slammed his throttle to full and angled straight down below the Interdictor. The space around the ship became a storm of green and blue blast of energy from the enemy. It looked like Sturdin was determined to capture him and only him. The Star Destroyers leveled their weapons on his ship, and the Fire’s shields began to collapse under the brunt of the fire. He could not escape from the destroyers and the fighters.

The Flame’s shields went down and blue ion energy enveloped the ship. All of the ship’s systems immediately powered down. Tesh swiveled his head toward his master, “Shall I prepare for individual combat, sir?”

“No. If you fight them, you will be destroyed.” Serrin paused for a few moments. “Today is not the day. They have beaten us. It looks like I will need your assistance in rescue. I want you to power down, and keep yourself hidden in the ship. The shielded hold will do.”

“Confirmed,” Tesh said. He stood from his co-pilot chair and left the cockpit.

Serrin watched as the destroyers and star fighters surrounded his ship on all sides. Vice Admiral Sturdin’s ship moved the closest and locked on a tractor beam. His ship was pulled into the cavern like landing bays of the Vengeance. He went to the hatch of the ship, lowered its ramp, and walked out onto the deck of the Victory II. He had to keep them from damaging his only escape.

A hundred Stormtroopers leveled their weapons on him as he exited. Serrin opened the palms of his hands in surrender. Four of them moved to his side, bound his hands in restraints and held him steady as the door of the docking bay opened. The Vice Admiral and Torlock walked into the landing bay followed by several high-ranking officers. The Vice Admiral wore a gloating grin on his face as they stepped up to the prisoner.

“Ah, my friend, Captain Ziehn, corruptor of law and justice. How nice it is to see you again,” Sturdin said. “I am here to personally deliver your arrest warrant. You have been very troublesome, but nothing we could not handle.”

Serrin looked at the Vice Admiral with calm eyes.

Sturdin continued, “You will be imprisoned and will do hard labor until your death. Of course I will recommend your execution as an alternative. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Serrin waited a few moments and said, “Nothing that a vile man, such as you would be worthy to hear.”

Sturdin’s face flushed red as he looked around at his fellow officers. Serrin realized these men were captains, and more than likely brought from their bridges to watch as Sturdin

captured his nemesis. Instead of cowering before the hunter, Serrin had insulted him deeply. The Vice Admiral appeared embarrassed, and he stepped a little closer to his prisoner. With a quick movement, Sturdin backhanded Serrin. The force of the blow knocked him off his feet. After a few moments Sturdin motioned for the guards. “Take him to the brig.”

Two of the Stormtroopers nodded and dragged Serrin away into the depths of the Vengeance’s hold.

* * * * *

Serrin sat at the communications display of the Vengeance and searched as he scrolled through the logs of the ship. From the time that had passed from his capture to the present, he estimated it had been nine months since he had been placed in cryogenic stasis. He had been in the cryocell for seven months after the battle that had virtually destroyed the Vengeance. He finally found the orders of the Vengeance dated seven months prior. Serrin began to read them.

“From the Imperial High Command to Vice Admiral Sturdin and Vengeance Task Force, you are ordered to rendezvous at included coordinates. The Emperor is preparing for an attack from the Rebel fleet at Endor. You have been ordered to take part in the defense initiative. Signed Admiral Piett, Death Star Task Force, the Executor.”

Serrin looked out the forward viewpoint to the green moon of Endor, and he realized what the mysterious supply route led to. The supply route his group had been working led to this very place. He continued to read and figured out what had happened. The Death Star II had been destroyed, the Imperial

fleet withdrawn or decimated as in the case of the Vengeance. The final entry by the Vice Admiral was to log his order to abandon ship. The news of another Death Star, the victory of the Rebellion, and the rush of emotion he felt at the overwhelming outcome made him rejoice. If only he could have been a part of that battle. He hoped some of his crew had tasted the victory the Rebellion had accomplished on that day.

The freed Captain pulled up the visual records of the battle and watched in amazement as the Rebel fleet arrived, turned, and fought. He watched as the Death Star unleashed its main weapon on the vulnerable Rebel ships, the Rebel fleet engage the Star Destroyers, the death of the Executor, and the Death Star's demise. With satisfaction he watched as Rebel ships pursued the fleeing Vengeance and blew it apart. He paused and took a deep breath, even if he never escaped this dead space junk, he was pleased Vice Admiral Sturdin had lost his beloved ship and fled. Hopefully, the Rebels captured him, but the recording was cut off when the ship's power systems shut down from damage.

Serrin sat in his chair looking out at the green moon, thinking when he felt a chill go up his spine. He spun around in his chair to find nothing on the bridge threatening. A very uneasy feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He stood up from his chair and backed toward the rear doors to the bridge. He raised his blaster and looked around. There was nothing but silence and shadows. The orbit of the dead star destroyer was beginning to take it behind the huge planet, out of line of the system's star.

Serrin put his Stormtrooper helmet back on, turned and carefully left the bridge. When he looked back, there was

nothing. He had to get down to the hanger bays to ascertain if his ship was still stored there. As he climbed down an access ladder he felt better, but then he thought he heard whispering above him coming from the access hatch. He stopped and held very still listening, nothing. He quickened his descent and hoped he was just being paranoid.

Chapter 3

Serrin stood looking through the view ports of the last possible entrance into the hanger bay's deep storage areas. He had discovered the regular hanger bays were completely carved out of the Star Destroyer's hull. It looked like the Rebel fighters attacking it had launched torpedoes directly into it, effectively destroying the rest of its tie fighters, shuttle craft, and landing craft.

The deep storage area was still intact. Its blast doors had closed. The heat of the explosion had effectively melted the doors into one single piece of metal, and Serrin doubted they would ever open again. The other three entrances to the storage area were either gone, the way to get to them exposed to space in some way. Serrin could not get to them due to the damage to the ship's super structure with collapsed or crushed routes. This final entrance was his only hope. The doors to this section were closed, but this one had view ports in it. The scene threatened to crush his hope. There was only one more hallway to the final door that led into the deep storage area, but the hallway Serrin

was looking at was mostly open to space. He could even see the gas giant through the rip in the hull.

Anger boiled up inside him as he cursed his fate. He pounded the door with the bottom of both fist and spun away in frustration. He finally sank down on the floor next to the door and let his mind calm down. He had survived this long, there had to be a way. All of the vacuum suits he could find were damaged, and he could not just walk across the hallway without protection. The atmosphere integrity field generator in this section was down. He would just float off into space if he went out there.

After a few moments he felt really drowsy, so he closed his eyes for a few moments to rest. He had only gotten three hours of sleep in thirty-six hours. His nerves were fraying with each disappointment. He needed to rest and gather his strength. When he had sufficiently calmed himself, he began a relaxation exercise his grandmother had taught him. It helped him rest easier. This room was just as good as another to catch some sleep. He lay down next to the wall by the door and let himself drift off.

About four hours later, after a fitful rest, Serrin woke up in a cold sweat. He thought he heard the whispering again. With blaster in hand he jumped to his feet and looked around through sleepy, dry eyes. The shadows were playing tricks on him. When he could get his eyes focused and feet stable, the shadowy figure he thought was standing in the shadows across from him was gone. His heart was pounding very fast and very hard. The feelings of rage and hatred permeated him, and he felt like he was suffocating under the weight of it.

Serrin ran from the room and headed toward the prison block. The whispering seemed to envelope him, and he spun around shooting his blaster at the shadows. There was nothing there. The cold feelings of hatred and rage were receding as he ran down the corridor. The sight of dead bodies did not help the situation, their vacant stares and opened mouths haunted him as he ran. The shadows seemed to close in, clutching at him. He had to get away.

* * * * *

Serrin ran through the first door to the prison block and activated the door. The door slowly closed, and he backed toward the other as he tried to control his breathing. He was sure there was something on the ship. It was dark and powerful. He kept his blaster up and pointed toward the closed door as he backed into the cryocell hall. The struggle with his fear fought him, but he mastered it as he did so many times before. Serrin had restored power to the area, and the prison block was warmer.

The Captain turned and activated the prisoner-monitoring console. The readouts reported the death of all the prisoners except one. Two of the active units had failed since Serrin had escaped due to a lack of power. The remaining unit showed 2% energy left in its reserves. If the power failed again, the last prisoner would also die. The Captain walked down the line of cryocells until he came to the last operating unit. The window was not obscured from view since the temperature was warmer.

The prisoner stunned Serrin. He was not expecting the face of the other prisoner to be a woman's. He removed his helmet, replaced his blaster in its sheath and walked back to the monitoring console. He selected the woman's cryocell, and pulled up her Imperial criminal record. She was a part of the Rebellion with an impressive record of successes. Serrin just hoped she had expertise in communications and repair to supplement his own. Cursing himself for not returning sooner, he moved through the menus of the console and selected the option to release her. The cryocell immediately began to bring her back to consciousness. The process would take some time, so Serrin moved to the stormtrooper he had not stripped and began to remove the necessary survival items.

The woman's records said her name was Autel Relmar, a Rebel officer and agent. Arrested for espionage on the Imperial controlled system of Daator, she was caught by Vice Admiral Sturdin during his search for Serrin. Her capture was related to Serrin and his circumstances. Her arrest had been a byproduct of a man's obsession with finding information on his prey. She was at the wrong place when Sturdin's troops stormed the underground complex the Rebels were using as an operations base for their network.

Captain Ziehn carried the body suit, power supply, and armor over to a bunk next to the cryocell and placed them in an orderly manner and waited. A quarter of an hour later, the cryocell had brought the woman's vitals back to normal. The equalizing of pressure caused the cell to hiss as its opening process activated. The door lifted up until it was suspended over the top of the cell. Serrin began disconnecting the monitors and

visual probes from her eyes. As with all prisoners, she was naked as well. As soon as he finished, he picked her up.

With a careful gentleness, Serrin placed her on the black ledge in the room that served as a bench for guards. He quickly began to dress her in the body suit he took from the other stormtrooper, doing his best to respect her privacy. The situation forced him to work quickly to get her suited up. The objective of survival took precedent over anything else.

He began attaching the stormtrooper armor to her body suit as well, and activated the suit's power to warm her up. The suit and armor were a little big for her, but they would do. Her power supply for the suit was down to under twenty-five percent, and when he checked his he noticed it was not far behind. There was not much difference. They both had about two days remaining before they had to recharge or find new power supplies.

The Captain knew the woman would be waking soon, "Autel wake up," he said, gently shaking her shoulder. The woman's eyes slowly opened. She struggled to focus her eyes on her surroundings. A few moments passed.

"Where am I?" Aut asked in a groggy voice.

"You're aboard your captor's ship, but fortunately you are in no danger," Serrin replied.

"Who are you?" she asked, her voice weak.

"I am Captain Serrin Ziehn, member of the Rebel Alliance... I freed you from your cell."

"How did you get here? We're aboard an Imperial Star Destroyer," she said slowly.

"It's a long story, but you're free, and we need to get some food into you. Come on, I will help you." Serrin reached

down and helped Autel stand. He wrapped his arm around her waist, and helped her to walk out of the Imperial brig after putting on both of their helmets.

“Call me Aut, if you rescued me, then you must be friend.”

Serrin looked down at her as he touched the panel to open the prison block door. “I am a friend, and I need your help, Lieutenant.”

As Serrin opened the door, the elusive dark feeling he had felt returned, but he pushed the feeling away and helped Aut to navigate the corridor. Their survival depended on him keeping his wits and controlling his paranoia. Half an hour later they made it to engineering.

* * * * *

Aut’s eyes consumed Serrin as he related to her all that he had learned so far about their predicament. She finished off a day’s standard ration with a healthy appetite and listened carefully. When he finished, she spoke, “I was imprisoned at least three months before you. It may take me a little longer to recover, but I know I can help. I should be able to repair the ship’s communications. With all my training it shouldn’t be a problem if the main transmitters are not completely destroyed.”

“I don’t think we will need the main transmitters,” Serrin said.

“Why not?” Aut asked.

“If we can just get internal communications, I should be able to access my ship’s transceiver. I am sure Imperial

procedures were followed, therefore my ship should be in deep storage.”

“Why does that matter when we can’t get to deep storage?” Aut asked.

“If I can contact my ship, I can contact my droid. With his help, he will be able to bring the supplies we need to cross through the depressurized sections.”

“Good plan,” Aut said, “I will get started as soon as I check out the systems. I will have to go to the communications section, but first I would like to get cleaned up. Are there living quarters still intact on this ship?”

“Yes,” Serrin said, “I was thinking the same thing. If we are going to be here a while, we should try to at least have some type of normal existence.”

“What is left?” Aut asked as she looked over Serrin’s shoulder at his display.

“The officer section is intact. I will route power to get it warmed up. We shouldn’t have a problem from what I can tell. We can take all of the supplies we have here up there with us. At least we will have beds to sleep on.”

“That’s a good idea,” Aut said. “Let’s try to get the water systems back on line, that way we won’t die of dehydration.”

“Agreed,” Serrin said.

* * * * *

Serrin stood under the hot shower and let it sooth his sore muscles. They had finally gotten the water systems in the officer quarters operational. It had taken over five hours, but the

importance to survival exceeded the priority level of anything else. Without water the two would die in days. The imperial engineer who had survived must not have had the expertise or the initiative to repair the water systems in this area. Thankfully, Aut was well trained in multiple skills to survive in enemy territory.

The freed prisoner felt well again, getting cleaned up and free from all the muck from the last nine months raised his spirits. The hot shower was a gift in his mind. He stood under the water for a few extra minutes before turning it off. He grabbed a towel as he opened the shower door and began to dry off.

“What are those green marks across your chest and back?” Aut asked.

Serrin jumped with surprise and quickly moved his towel to block her view. “What are you doing in here?”

“Well,” Aut said, “I figured we needed to be on even footing. After all, I know you must have dressed me.”

Serrin wrapped the towel around his waist and stared at her in silence. He was not sure if he should be mad or humored. He cracked a smile. “I guess you’re right.”

“Plus, the silence on this ship was giving me the creeps,” Aut said.

“I can relate,” Serrin replied with an understanding nod as he picked up another towel and continued to dry off. He worked to not let Aut’s steady gaze bother him. He was very aware of her as she crossed the room from the door to sit on a bench next to the shower. Her short, dark blond hair was combed back; her eyes seemed to look inside of him. The thin,

standard issue, undergarments they had found did not do much to hide Aut's body.

"So, what about them?" Aut asked, referring to the green marks that crossed his body.

"I'm Aeridian," Serrin said, "my people genetically altered the first human colonists, using plant DNA to gain the ability to produce food from exposure to light."

"Useful," Aut commented.

"It is," Serrin said.

"What other advantages did they work out?" Aut asked.

"Altering our genetics brought a byproduct they were not expecting," Serrin said.

"What?" Aut asked.

"We require more water than an average human, and we are more sensitive to our surroundings. Some have thought we are naturally tuned to the Force," Serrin replied.

"The what?" Aut asked.

"The Force," Serrin said, "ever read your history?"

"Oh, you mean the Jedi's religion," Aut replied. "So you're a Jedi?"

"No. My Grandmother was before she disappeared. She talked to me some at a very young age, taught me a few things, but she disappeared around the time I was eight."

Aut gazed at him. "I have never met nor seen a Jedi."

He walked passed her, aware of her watching him, down a small hallway and into the quarters they had commandeered as their living quarters. He quickly pulled on his undergarments. Just as he finished, Aut came into the room, sat down on the bed next to his, and leaned back on the pillow.

“My head is still really groggy from that extended cryo sleep. I think I need to rest a while,” she said.

“I think I need some rest too. My rest periods have been really messed up since I got out,” Serrin said.

“From all you told me,” Aut said, “I can understand why.”

Serrin walked over and laid down on his bed. “Let’s sleep a while before we get started on the communications.”

“Okay,” Aut said and closed her eyes, “Serrin?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you for getting me out,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” Serrin replied, “I’m glad I was able too. I just wish I would have come earlier. Maybe I could have saved the other prisoners.”

Chapter 4

Serrin's dreams were fitful and dark. As he began to drift, he tossed and turned. He was very cold, and the nightmares returned to him. The shadows seemed alive in the dark corridors of the ship. They contorted and grasped at him as he ran down long, extending corridors. The floor seemed to stretch out before him, and as he ran the shadows drew closer. The sound of many, hideous voices quietly echoed around him.

Then the floor became slick and he fell. He landed on his chest and slammed his face into the floor. His hands felt sticky as he pushed himself up onto his knees. He looked down at his hands, his white tunic; they were covered in dark blood. Horror seized him as he looked up then down the corridor. A dark form blocked the distant light. Black robes moved with a stabbing cold breeze. Deep within the robed figure's throat, a slow, wicked chuckle began to vibrate into the freezing air.

Serrin tried to stand up, but he seemed rooted in place by invisible hands. The dark figure moved towards him. A

strong hand grabbed Serrin's chin and forced his head back. The robed figure bent down close to Serrin's face. A dark orange fire erupted in the figure's eyes. "Is this the one?" the man whispered sarcastically as he searched Serrin's eyes with his own. As he spoke, many wicked voices seemed to drip from his lips. The man's touch was painful, but Serrin could not move to escape.

Serrin could feel the anger, the burning rage flowing out of the robed figure. His evil choked him; it polluted his air with its vile, thick poison. "I can feel your fear," he said. With that the man's free hand circled Serrin's throat. His grasp was like iron.

Serrin fought for breath as the man's hands began to tighten. The man began to slip into a shadowy form as he squeezed with impossible strength. Tendrils of black poison began to drift up Serrin's body toward his mouth. As Serrin began to gasp for air, his mouth opened. The tendrils of darkness began to touch his lips, and then began to drift into his mouth and into his throat.

The robed figure seemed to melt completely into a dark shadow. Only the eyes of dark orange fire remained. Serrin tried to scream, to close his mouth, but he could not. The man's grasp was just too strong. Then, the words of Serrin's grandmother came to him, "You will find your strength in peace, in the Force." Serrin's eyes closed as he withdrew into himself.

He reached outward for the life energy around him, and instantly he was filled with strength. The power of the Force freed him from his paralysis. With all the strength he could summon he pushed himself backward away from the cloud of

shadow assaulting him. The sudden movement broke him free and he rolled away and onto his feet. The dark shadows immediately collected themselves again into the robed figure.

“Do you think you can escape me?” the wicked man asked. “Your destiny lies with me... you will kneel before your master.” A scream shook Serrin awake.

Serrin’s eyes slammed open with a tremendous intake of breath. His raw throat felt like it was stuffed with cotton. He could not see through the darkness above him. He rolled to his left toward Aut’s direction. His body was stiff and cold, but he was energized by the power of the Force. When he jumped from his bunk the light streaming in the doorway from the restroom area slapped into his eyes. Aut was standing on the opposite side of her bed against the wall staring at Serrin with wide eyes. Her blaster was leveled at his chest.

“Aut!” Serrin said.

“Get out of the way!” Aut yelled.

Serrin felt the crackling energy behind him, a cold abyss threatening to swallow him. Serrin leapt to his right and rolled across the floor. He heard the shots of Aut’s blaster as he rolled up and onto his feet. Turning around he watched Aut’s shots disappear inside a great black writhing cloud of darkness that had engulfed his bed. His nightmare was a reality. His mind reeled for a moment as the feelings of dread threatened to crash down on him. Serrin worked to calm himself and watched as the blackness began to dissipate. Serrin thought could hear voices whispering as the darkness receded.

“What is that?” Aut yelled.

“I don’t know,” Serrin said, “get dressed!”

Serrin and Aut grabbed their Stormtrooper armor and dressed as quickly as possible. Serrin felt very cold, his throat hurt, and he was shocked by his experience with the robed figure. “I don’t know what it is, but it is evil,” Serrin said to Aut. “In a dream I was being attacked by a man in dark robes. I could not see anything else.”

“We are not having some kind of a group hallucination or something?” Aut asked.

“No.” Serrin replied. “We have to get off this ship as soon as possible. This place is a haven for something I have never encountered before.”

“Great,” Aut said, “that is just great. How are we supposed to fight it?”

“I don’t know,” Serrin said. “We have to get off this ship.”

“And destroy it!” Aut said as she put her helmet on.

The two held their blaster rifles in front of them and quickly moved to each side of the door. Serrin peaked through the doorway, but could not see anything. They both switched their visors over to dark vision and moved into the hallway. Serrin motioned and the two quickly ran down toward the lift. With their backs to the wall they waited for the lift to arrive. Serrin could hear Aut’s breathing, slow and rhythmic. She was scared, but her training was keeping her together.

After what seem like an eternity, the lift door opened and the two checked it, then they moved inside. “Let’s get to the bridge,” Aut said. “I can start there.” The lift immediately started its ascent. Serrin reflected on their encounter.

Whatever the darkness was, it was empowered by something from the Dark Side. His Grandmother had talked to

him some about it, but he did not understand what was going on. That must have been what he had been feeling all along during the time since his escape. He thought about the feelings of dread that had been plaguing him, now he knew why.

A chill dug into Serrin's bones. As the doors to the lift opened, Aut led the way, down the darkened hallway to the access hatches that would lead to the bridge. They began the long tedious climb to the decks above.

* * * * *

Serrin stood and watched Aut work. She had opened a huge floor plate to work on the burned circuits and wiring below the communications console. He walked over to the viewpoint and looked out at the stars. In a few hours they would emerge from behind the planet into the sun's light. The moon the Death Star II had orbited would again be coming into sight as well. Serrin was astonished at the speed of the orbiting wrecks, but the velocity of the ship had never eased after its attempt at escape from the Alliance.

As Serrin looked from wrecked ships, a light caught his eye in the distance. Something was coming through the debris. He locked his helmet's visor onto the point and magnified. Clearing a carcass of an Imperial Dreadnought, a huge Imperial Star Destroyer II came into view followed by three bulk cruisers, a system patrol craft, and three smaller shuttles. "Aut! Ships coming in."

"What? You are kidding me." Aut pulled herself up from inside the floor and ran to the viewpoint next to Serrin. "That's just great! Just what we need, more Imperials. I wonder

what they are doing out here. Maybe they are collecting anything that may be of worth on these dead ships.”

“Yeah. I wonder how much time we have?”

“Not much, once one of those small shuttles gets here, they will scan the ship and read our life signs. They will come aboard.”

Serrin looked down at Aut. “Won’t they be surprised to find someone alive.”

“I’m sure they will. They probably need laborers.”

“It would be a great way to escape, but I am not going back into a cryocell,” Serrin said.

Aut nodded in agreement. “I feel the same way. Let’s get these communications working.” She ran and climbed back down into the floor.

Two hours later, Serrin watched an incoming shuttle with intensity. The other ships had stopped at the dreadnought and the shuttles fanned out to scan more wrecks. As the shuttle came closer he recognized the Imperial symbol on the side. It slowed, as it got closer, obviously scanning. Serrin recognized the ship as an assault shuttle, which he knew carried stormtroopers for landing into a hostile environment.

A crackling noise issued from the communications console behind him. “Almost there!” Aut yelled from beneath the floor. Then there was a snapping sound and a man’s voice echoed from the bridge comm speakers.

“This is Shuttle Rondirem to command. We have something strange on our scans of this ship.”

Aut’s cry of triumph echoed from beneath the floor as she began climbing up to the main deck.

“This is Conquest command. What kind of anomaly are you picking up?”

“Sir, we are picking up power and life signs. There is someone alive on that ship.”

“What is that ship’s transponder sequence?”

“The transponder is not responding to query, sir.”

There was a pause in the communications. “This is Conquest, Commander, you are authorized to land your troops on the ship and find out who is still alive. I am sure they will be ready for a rescue!”

“Yes, sir!” the Commander of the shuttle returned with a note of excitement in his voice.

Serrin walked over to the communication console and looked over Aut’s shoulder. “Well, what do you think? Should we make contact to slow them down?”

Aut pondered the question. “I don’t know, I think we should let them wonder. Then we can catch them by surprise.”

“I agree,” Serrin said. “If you don’t mind, let me see if I can contact my ship.”

“Sure,” Aut said as she stood up and let Serrin sit down.

Serrin’s fingers worked over the console with an agile touch. He typed the Aeridian Flame’s transponder code and waited. The console hummed and beeped, sending out a signal. There was no response. The console displayed the signal being blocked by a cut circuit. Serrin sighed and typed in for the system to bypass the damaged pathway. A few moments later the console reported a successful transmission. Aut smiled and touched Serrin’s shoulder.

Serrin waited in anticipation. Then above all hope, the familiar voice of his ship’s computer echoed across the bridge,

“This is Aeridian Flame.” Serrin’s fingers quickly went to work. A smile played across his lips as hope shined into his heart.

* * * * *

Commander Vrendel surveyed the destroyed landing bays of the disabled Victory II Star Destroyer through the viewpoint of his Assault Shuttle, Rondirem. “I cannot believe that anyone survived on board that ship for this long.”

“I agree,” a man in dark gray body armor replied, “though, somehow they did.”

Vrendel looked over at the man and nodded. “If we find our Admiral’s prize, you and I will be rewarded handsomely.”

Lieutenant Schull Dreug, an Imperial Special Ops officer, nodded as well. “In ways beyond purely financial gain.” He felt like smashing the Commander across the face for his insolence. All that mattered was the honor of the Empire. That was what Emperor Palpatine would have demanded.

Ever since the death of Lord Vader and the Emperor on board the destroyed Death Star, the Empire was beginning to unravel. There were already rumors of factions being formed within their ranks. The dogs like Vrendel were only interested in their pursuit of wealth and power.

Schull felt sick at the sight of the man. The Empire could still crush the Rebel Alliance, but the Empire needed a powerful, ruthless leader. Their hope had been in the Emperor or Lord Vader, who were now dead and gone. They needed a replacement. He turned his attention back to the wreck they were going to board.

Commander Vrendel stepped down from his command chair and stood next to the massive form of Schull. The Commander's eyes were level with Schull's broad chest. He looked up at the square jaw, shaved head, and piercing eyes to find him studying the wreck. He made Vrendel very nervous in his presence. "Ensign Tobey," Vrendel said, "can we dock with any of the emergency docking hatches along the dorsal hull?"

The ensign hunched over his console with a close fervor that pleased Schull. "Yes, sir, there is one operational, but it doesn't have power. We will have to use the Rondirem's power for access."

"That is acceptable, ensign, bring us in," Vrendel ordered.

Schull turned on his heel. "I will prepare the troops, comm, send Sergeant Ion to the prep area."

Commander Vrendel swiveled in his chair and watched Schull exit the bridge.

Lieutenant Schull felt the icy stare as the door of the bridge closed. Vrendel would not last long by Schull's estimation. He would find a thermo detonator in the final seconds of its countdown strapped to his chest.

* * * * *

Sergeant Dexter Ion stood at attention as Lieutenant Dreug barked his orders to him and his soldiers. The man's foul breath did wonders to shake off his slumber. He had been napping in his bunk when the comm interrupted his sleep to send him to meet with the Lieutenant.

“You will find the survivors, evacuate them, and conduct an orderly search of the ship for our objective.”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” yelled the stormtroopers in unison.

“When the objective has been located, you will contact your sergeant and me at once!” Schull continued with his enthusiastic, characteristic yell.

“Sir! Yes, sir!” the troops returned.

“Suit up!” Schull ordered.

The troops launched themselves into action. Two squads headed for their weapons, the others, their stormtrooper armor. Sergeant Ion suited up in his regular stormtrooper outfit and prepped his weapons. The sounds of rifles, grenade launchers, and suit weapon servos reminded him of the glory days of the Empire, before the Massacre of Endor by the enemy. Dexter put his helmet on his bald head and waited.

The sounds of the Assault Shuttle slowing to connect with their access port thrilled him. The engines slowed to a mutter and in seconds they were silenced. The sounds of a docking clamp echoed throughout the ship. He faced the access hatch and waited. Seconds passed and his teams were ready, hungry, and willing. Moments later the sound of pressure equalization in the inner air lock made his pulse race. Then the hatch opened. His troopers moved forward rapidly with precision and caution. He followed into the dark depths of the shattered war ship.

* * * * *

Stormtroopers poured onto the bridge of the Vengeance and quickly took control. The humming of the power systems

echoed around them with a hollow echo. Sergeant Ion directed his troops with quick gestures, but the bridge was empty. The troops moved quietly among the wreckage and consoles. When the area was secured Sergeant Ion spoke on his comlink, "Lieutenant Dreug, Group One here, sir, the bridge is secure."

"Excellent, have you found anyone?" Schull returned.

"No, sir, there are signs of habitation and repair, but no one is here," Dexter replied.

"Check the computer systems," the Lieutenant ordered.

"Yes, sir," Dexter said, "Group One out."

The Sergeant gestured to his computer specialist who holstered his blaster rifle and immediately went to the computer console. Dexter surveyed the damage to the bridge, and he was surprised anyone had survived on this derelict. He walked over to one of the viewpoints and noticed the distant Star Destroyer, Conquest. From this very spot anyone on this ship would have been able to see her magnificence. That would be a welcome site for anyone marooned on this almost dead ship.

"Sir!" Ion's comp specialist called with an intense intake of breath.

Dexter spun on his heel and quickly moved toward the computer console. "Report!"

"Sir, we have a problem," the specialist said. "A very big problem."

"What is it?" Dexter asked with impatience.

If his men could have seen his face when he looked down at the display they would have been just as shocked. Dexter was a pro at keeping a straight, emotionless face in the midst of the worst circumstances. His eyes were not playing tricks. "Put it on audio," he said.

“Yes, sir,” the stormtrooper said.

Dexter waited a few moments. Then the signal came through in a man’s voice. “All personnel, abandon ship, repeat, abandon ship. Auto destruct sequence set, you have t-minus thirty-nine minutes to reach a safe distance.”

Dexter’s group all turned toward him. If he could see their faces they would mirror the shocked expression on his face. “Lieutenant Dreug, this is Group One, we have a serious problem. Someone has set the auto destruct sequence.”

“What?” the Lieutenant barked in surprise. In a moment he had pulled his thoughts into order. “I assume that our survivors are not friendly. Gentlemen, we have a lead. Sergeant disable that sequence.”

“Yes, sir. Out,” Sergeant Ion said. “Disable it.”

The computer specialist’s fingers moved with lightning speed. In a moment the computer spoke, “Please enter authorization.”

Sergeant Ion pondered the question trying to remember his emergency procedures. “This is Sergeant D. Ion, Imperial Emergency code, Beta 34-03193-31318.”

The computer screen seemed to vibrate a moment. “Imperial code not accepted. Please enter authorization.”

Dexter gritted his teeth.

“Slice in,” Sergeant Ion ordered, “quickly.”

* * * * *

Serrin made a quick glance around a corner, his blaster rifle held at the ready. There was nothing but dark corridor. He motioned for Aut to follow and he moved forward. They were

heading toward the docking bays as quickly as caution would allow. They had to get to the ship, or they would die along with the Imperials when the Vengeance gave her final death cry.

“You sure they will not be able to stop it?” Serrin whispered into his comlink.

“Not unless they can crack a 200 random character code. It would take a slicer program at least three hours to do that. By then, nothing but toasted white armor.”

“We really got lucky being able to slice the computer core and gain command protocols,” Serrin said.

“Yeah, but thanks to the heavy damage, it was easy for me. Not to mention that the auto destruct sequence was still intact,” Aut replied.

“The baseline security systems are heavily protected to give the captain every option to scuttle his ship so the enemy can’t gain access.”

“Sure, Captain,” Aut said.

Serrin thought that Aut’s remark was a little sarcastic, but he dismissed it as they approached the next corridor. As they cautiously made their way, Serrin suddenly stopped and motioned for Aut to do the same. She quickly took up a defensive position and waited as she heard Serrin whispering. His ship must have contacted him. After a few moments of what sounded like a heated argument under his breath he switched over to her comm frequency.

“What is it?” she asked.

“The Imperials must have taken just about everything off my ship. There is equipment missing, which includes my zero atmosphere breathing masks.”

Aut gritted her teeth in frustration. “What should we do?”

Serrin was quiet a few moments, pondering the crisis. “Give me a minute.”

* * * * *

Stormtroopers worked through the only parts of engineering that were still intact. They found the workspace Serrin had used as a bunk. Also, they found the functioning generator and reported their findings. Lieutenant Dreug strolled through the refuse littered across the deck and looked over the repairs. He smiled and nodded toward the dead engineer Serrin had disposed of a short distance away.

“The man knew how to do his job. Now get that stinking corpse out of here,” Schull ordered. He watched as a couple of stormtroopers picked up the carcass and dragged it away. He walked over to a dirty pile of engineering rags and eyed them, “Dreug to Group One, status?”

Sergeant Ion’s voice sounded strained, “Sir, we are still unable to slice into the computer core. Whoever plugged it up sure knew how to keep anyone out who wanted to protest over destroying the ship.”

“Save the commentary, Sergeant,” Dreug barked into his comlink. “I want everyone we have with skills to tackle this problem to be put to work. I do not want this ship to blow before we have a chance to find our objective.”

“Acknowledged, sir,” the Sergeant replied. “One other thing, sir, we have confirmed we are aboard the Vengeance.”

Schull stopped his pacing and smiled. “Then we are not far from our prize. The Admiral will be pleased. Dreug out.”

The Lieutenant pointed to the lead trooper in the area. “Get down to the cell block and find out what happened to the prisoners, specifically, one A. Relmar.”

“Aye, sir,” the stormtrooper said and led his troops out of engineering.

Schull stood staring after them as his mind began to wander. After a few minutes he started after them. He would find his Admiral’s prize and return to him in triumph. He would even bring him the body of his most hated rival, Serrin Ziehn. There would be no stopping them, and he would become the right hand man of the most powerful warlord in the galaxy. They would ride to power on the death and blood of those who opposed them. The Emperor and Vader would be pale comparisons with Admiral Sturdin and his Lieutenant at his side. The power of the unified Empire would only increase, and the pathetic Rebellion would be ultimately crushed.

Decks later as Schull turned a corner he almost tripped over the body of a freshly slain stormtrooper. Horror filled him as he recognized the troopers of Group Two Beta. The group was strewn about the long, shadowy corridor in twisted poses. Fresh blood leaked out from under helmets and blaster scorched armor. Schull stumbled back with a startled cry and slammed into a bulkhead as his helmet began filtering out the smoke in the corridor.

He flipped on his comlink, “Groups One, Two, Three, and Four, Alert 1, Alert 1, Group Two Beta has been compromised, Level 23, corridor 9-”

Schull's voice was suddenly cut off as he was speaking. Something hard and metallic slammed up against the side of his helmet. He slumped down onto the floor next to his fallen troops. Aut looked over at Serrin and nodded.

* * * * *

Serrin felt cold and a tremor in his inner being clutched at him. He paused and leaned against the wall. For a moment he felt like he was going to vomit. His stomach felt sick as he looked over at Aut. Her body language told him what her eyes would have if he could see them behind the trooper mask. She was concerned over his apparent wobbly disposition.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

“I don't know. I suddenly feel really sick,” he replied. “Some of the explosive concussion from that grenade came through my area where I was hiding when we took out those stormtroopers.

“Don't go getting sick on me now. I need you tip top for this crazy mission you have us on.”

“Crazy? Do you have any better ideas?” he asked.

“No, but the thought of attacking an Imperial assault craft is not my idea of a good one.”

“What other choice do we have?” Serrin asked. “If we don't get something to get us across to my ship through the torn out docking bay, we are going to die here. We have to get some zero G equipment.”

Aut shifted her shoulders. “I know, I know... lead the way.”

Serrin gathered his strength and started down the hallway when he crumpled to the floor in agony. His blaster rifle slid from his grip as he clutched at his stomach. The vile feelings he had quadrupled and he tore his helmet from his head.

“What’s going on?” Aut said as she kept watch down each direction of the corridor.

Great waves of pain rushed through Serrin as his body reacted violently. He pushed himself back on his knees and wiped his face with a gloved hand. After a few moments the pain subsided.

Aut looked over at him. “You look horrible.”

Serrin held his abdomen. “I think I might have some internal bleeding.”

“That is not good,” Aut said.

“I need to get to my ship, to the medical bay.”

“That wasn’t something I didn’t know,” Aut said.

“This is no time for jokes,” Serrin replied.

“That was sarcasm, not a joke,” Aut said.

Serrin slowly stood up, replaced his helmet and led the way again. This time at a subdued pace, blaster rifle ready. Aut heard him switch over to another comm. signal and start talking. She did not pay much attention. Her mind was screaming to escape, and she was focusing on the task at hand. One mistake and they would not make it.

* * * * *

Sergeant Ion stood and watched as Group One assembled the bodies of Group Two Beta along the corridor. He

was quietly frightened, but he kept his thoughts to himself. He had to keep his troops disciplined and in order. A lack of self-control was not going to benefit anyone in this type of situation. The troops had checked the weapons of their fallen comrades and found that no one had fired a shot. How could an entire squad get wiped out and not even fire one shot? The enemy must have set a trap.

As the troops completed their grisly work of laying the dead on emergency stretchers, Sergeant Ion surveyed his data pad. Group Three was working its way toward the prison block, and Group Four was working in the computer core of the Vengeance. They still had not sliced into the computer to stop the self destruct sequence. He checked his timer and it told him his people had twenty-four minutes left. That was all the time he had to complete his mission.

The troubling part of the massacre before him was the one MIA. Group one had not located the body of Lieutenant Dreug. Whatever did this had taken their commanding officer from them, and they could not raise him on their comlinks. If the troops had taken down some of the enemy, Dexter would have figured that the Lieutenant was taken prisoner, but since no shots were fired, he had no idea what was going on.

“Sergeant?”

Sergeant Ion turned to his second, “Yes?”

“We are prepared to get underway.”

“Let’s go,” Dexter ordered. The troops picked up their fallen and began the long trek back to the shuttle Rondirem. “Rondirem, this is Group One, give me Commander Vrendel.”

After a few moments the Commander was on the link. “This is Vrendel. Sergeant what is going on?”

“Sir, preliminary report, Group Two Beta has taken full losses and Lieutenant Dreug is missing.”

The Commander hesitated, “Have your people disabled the self-destruct sequence?”

“No, sir.”

“Have your people found the Rebel operative’s corpse yet?”

“No, sir. Group Three is enroute to the prison block.”

The Commander’s voice was strained, “Sergeant, we have twenty-two minutes left, I want the Admiral’s prize found. We must get the information she has to complete the Admiral’s plans. Without the data it will not work. The data chip should be imbedded in her left forearm. Failure is not acceptable.”

“Yes sir, understood,” Sergeant Ion replied and switched off his comlink.

He shook his head and followed his group down the corridor.

Chapter 5

Serrin and Aut readied their weapons as they peered around the final corner that led to the Imperial assault shuttle. They had checked with the computer and located the exact location of the ship by accessing the airlock database. The only airlock activated recently would be the one the shuttle used to attach to the Vengeance.

Serrin motioned for Aut to follow him. “Surprise will be on our side.”

As he turned the corner he stiffened and stood as tall as he could. Aut was noticeable shorter than him, and most stormtroopers, so he would have to block the view of her until the last possible moment. He walked with the stride of a trooper with an important mission. As he neared the access hatch, two stormtroopers noticed his approach.

The first thing he noticed was their alert postures and readied weapons. The next thing he noticed was the open hatch leading into the assault shuttle’s interior. The warm light inside the hatch suddenly invoked a powerful urge to escape the

wrecked ship. He wanted to just run inside and get away from the lurking evil in the dark corridors. He calmed his nerves and kept moving.

He noticed the two visibly relaxed, lowering their weapons as they recognized what they thought was one of their own troops. The lead stormtrooper's voice crackled into Serrin's ear, "Glad to see you back, we have been wondering what is going on. The Commander put the entire shuttle and crew on Alert 1."

As the stormtrooper finished his statement, the muzzle of Serrin's blaster belched angry red energy as he snapped it upward. The bolt hit the stormtrooper in his upper chest and he fell with a grunt of pain. Red fire from behind Serrin shot past his shoulder and hit the other trooper between his helmet and breastplate. His cry was burned away before it began.

Serrin and Aut launched forward in a run, blasters ready as their desperation shot up a notch. They had to get those suits. As they entered the hatchway a stormtrooper came running out from the interior of the shuttle. Serrin dove at his feet and launched him into the air above and behind him. The stormtrooper crashed to the floor, visibly stunned, and Aut's boot crunched down on his neck and a blaster bolt ended his struggle.

Serrin was back on his feet in a run, and dashed through the interior hatch door to the shuttle and into the prep area. The three storm troopers approaching the door did not recognize him or the short storm trooper coming in behind him for an enemy until it was too late. Serrin's blaster echoed as he unloaded on the troops. Aut ran to his left and hit a button on a control panel after assisting him. Two doors opened to reveal the supply

room. She ran inside as Serrin followed launching a couple of warning shots at two more stormtroopers entering at the other end of the prep bay.

They dodged and rolled and shot back. The wall sizzled by Serrin's left shoulder as they just missed him. He took cover behind the interior wall of the supply room. He watched Aut run toward one wall after a pause and pull a lever. Three panels swung open from the wall revealing just what they needed. Serrin's attention was drawn back to the enemy as red bolts shot through the door and slammed into the wall.

"Hurry up!" he shouted as he shot back. The two troopers were advancing toward them with more shooting from the opposite door.

"Give me a few seconds!" Aut replied, as she began stuffing the zero G-suits into a large supply bag. That was when an alarm sounded throughout the shuttle.

"Keep calm," Serrin whispered to himself, "keep calm."

* * * * *

"This is Rondirem, we are under attack, repeat under attack. We have intruders on board. Security protocols initiated."

The Comm officer's voice was full of urgency as the entire Imperial fleet listened. The Rondirem was calling for help on all Imperial channels. Sergeant Ion motioned for Groups One and Three to move out. Dexter stood looking into the empty pod of Prisoner Relmar. The woman had escaped her cryocell somehow, and was probably responsible for the attack on the Rondirem. That was her only escape.

He looked over the prisoner console and read the history of Prisoner 35, Serrin Ziehn's release, and the release of Prisoner 62, Autel Relmar. All the other prisoners had perished due to the power failure and exhausted power supplies. Someone else must have released Prisoner 35 and later released the rebel operative they were searching for with zeal. They must get that data chip. The information was worth millions of credits, equipment, and strategic value. It was so valuable that Admiral Sturdin had ordered the use of untold amounts of resources to locate it.

The other standing order was to eliminate Prisoner 35, if he had not already perished. The rumor was that Prisoner 35 had been under a death sentence for his crimes against the Empire and more specifically, Admiral Sturdin. It was a personal vendetta. Sergeant Ion turned and followed his troops out as they began their quick return to the Rondirem.

Sergeant Ion activated his comlink, "Rondirem, this is Group One, we possibly have three rebel intruders."

"Acknowledged."

* * * * *

Serrin gritted his teeth as he sent a stormtrooper reeling backwards with a bolt in the lower torso. They were losing this battle and there were numerous troops moving toward them from the opposite door. He turned his attention to Aut who was at the other entrance shooting. She stepped back and hit a switch. Another panel opened and revealed weapons. She grabbed something and tossed it to Serrin.

"Stun grenade!" he said. "Thank you!"

“Use it!” Aut ordered.

Serrin activated the weapon and threw it into the prep area. She lobbed two more in quick secession. They slammed their backs up against the wall of the supply room and waited. The shock from the grenades vibrated through the wall and floor and threatened to overwhelm them. He gritted his teeth and hung on as the shock wave dissipated.

Aut glanced through the door and said, “Clear!”

Serrin turned and bolted through the door he was guarding and turned toward the hatch. Aut was right behind him. Seven stormtroopers were strewn about unconscious. He could tell there were more through the opposite door, but they were not waiting around to fight them. The two escaped prisoners ran through hatchway door just as the stormtroopers opened fire behind them. Bolts lanced at them from the open door, but slammed into nothing as the two disappeared through the hatch and back into the Vengeance.

They hurtled the fallen troopers they had encountered and headed down the corridor. Just as they were coming to the turn to head toward the docking bays, they ran squarely into another group of stormtroopers who had been alerted to their disguises. They opened fire immediately. The two dove into a side passage and waited. Aut moved down the corridor with her blaster ready.

“Blocked!” Aut said over their comlink from down the corridor. “We are cut off!”

“We have fourteen minutes!” Serrin replied. “We have to get out of here. And we have a bit of a problem. I’m hit.” He slid down the wall next to Aut holding his left leg with one hand, blaster in the other.

Aut looked down at him and saw a nasty, smoking hole in his stormtrooper armor between his knee and hip. She was surprised he was still conscious.

* * * * *

Group Four's commanding trooper called for Sergeant Ion as soon as they encountered the intruders. His group focused on keeping them cornered until reinforcements arrived. Stormtroopers from the shuttle took up position at the other end of the corridor and guarded that escape. The stormtroopers had mapped this area and they knew the intruders were trapped.

"Sir, we have them cornered," the Group Four lead said to the Sergeant.

"Good. Keep them there. We should be there in minutes."

"Yes, sir."

The stormtroopers took turns firing shots to keep the intruders trapped. They were not going anywhere. The trapped prey had ceased to return fire and waited for their inevitable capture. Group Four's lead smiled to himself, he would be promoted for this success.

That was when he noticed a soft hum behind him; he turned and was at a loss for words. The barrel of a large blaster rifle greeted him with its immensity. The blast sent him reeling backward past his troops and further down the corridor. He fell with a shutter. The other troops turned toward that direction to find themselves at the ends of two large barrels as a large dark form hovered in the middle of the corridor. The barrels opened fire and the sound of their doom greeted them with its vicious

melody. Two troopers returned fire and their vengeance turned to frustration as their shots glanced off powerful shields. Red targeting lasers danced from stormtrooper to stormtrooper as the two barrels spit their red fiery venom.

The rapid fire from the two weapons finished the squad before them and sent the others from the shuttle scurrying backward. Three fell before they escaped. The hum of repulser lifts quieted and metallic feet touched the corridor's floor. The two large barrels retracted into a pair of metallic arms. Two other arms threw the rubble out of the way that the stormtroopers were using for cover as the powerful droid moved forward.

“Captain, all clear, you may proceed,” Tesh S5R reported via comlink to Serrin.

“Tesh!” Serrin called from the blocked corridor. “We have ten minutes to get off this ship! I require your assistance. Come over here.”

* * * * *

Sergeant Ion stood stunned by the death of his troops. This scene was very different than the last. Holes were burned through these fallen comrades, and they had returned fire. They had not captured their objective. Dexter cursed the turn of events and the missing third person that showed up. “Group One to Rondirem, the objective has escaped.”

Commander Vendrel's angry voice came on the line, “Sergeant that is not acceptable. Pursue and capture target.”

Sergeant Ion gritted his teeth. “But, sir, we only have eight minutes before the Vengeance self-destructs. We do not have time to pursue.”

Commander Vendrel’s anger spilled over in a yell. “Well, you had better hurry then and find them!”

Sergeant Ion shook his head as he spoke, “Yes, sir.”

After switching off his comlink he turned to his remaining troops. His slicers had failed to crack into the computer core, and the ship was going to erupt into a big ball of slag and flame in minutes. Over a quarter of his troops were dead. The Vengeance was a death trap, a ghost ship that he was finished with by his estimation.

“Our commander has signed our death notices. Those who want to die, you can continue on with the mission. All those who want to live, follow me.”

“That would be my assessment as well,” Lieutenant Dreug said from behind his subordinate. Sergeant Dexter immediately snapped to attention along with his remaining troops. “At ease, Sergeant, men,” Schull said. Dried blood and make shift bandages held a nasty gash together on the side of Schull’s head.

“Sir? Your orders?” Sergeant Dexter asked.

“Let’s go. And one of you give me a hand. I barely made it back up here on my own as it is. My helmet comm unit isn’t functioning due to the blow my attacker gave me.”

“Yes, sir,” Dexter responded. He pointed to one of his troopers to assist the Lieutenant. Then he turned on his heel and headed toward the assault shuttle. As he passed his men in the hallway the sound of the boots behind him registered that all of his remaining troops were following. He heard the ones not

carrying bodies check their weapons and lock them into hot mode.

* * * * *

As Tesh, Serrin, and Aut approached the docking bay they stopped long enough to slip into the zero G-suits that they had taken from the Imperial assault shuttle. Tesh kept watch as they finished up and again led the way. Aut helped Serrin continue toward their escape with his wounded leg.

Serrin and Aut left their stormtrooper armor behind and hurried forward as fast as possible. The Imperial suits would be perfect. They were complete with gravity boots to hold them to the surface of the ship.

As they approached the door to the gutted docking bays, Serrin was aware of the dark presence again and could feel the tremors in the Force from the horror. Serrin glanced over at Aut who was looking at him when he paused.

“Skywalker... Skywalker...” The sound of the voice made Aut's skin crawl.

Serrin shuttered as he could feel the powerful hatred and rage in the monstrosity nearby. Deep, hollow voices whispered to Serrin as they moved away, then finally nothing but silence.

Tesh followed the two as they reached the door they were heading for. The droid led Serrin and Aut out into the gutted docking bay. As they moved across the shattered area, Serrin caught sight of his beautiful ship sitting perched, attached to the side of the bay wall. The chilled feeling in his being did

not recede, and he could still feel the hatred and anger behind him from the bowels of the Vengeance.

* * * * *

The door to the Rondirem's bridge opened and the remaining stormtroopers marched inside. They easily took control of the bridge as Lieutenant Dreug approached Commander Vrendel. He lowered his blaster as the Commander stood from his seat with a shocked look on his face. Schull's punch landed squarely on the man's chin and sent him slamming back down into his command chair, unconscious.

The Lieutenant grabbed him by his command frock and dragged him out of the chair and onto the floor. "Take him to the brig," he ordered. Two stormtroopers took the man away.

Schull addressed the bridge crew, "I am taking command of this ship until we return to the fleet. Comm, how long before the Vengeance detonates?"

"Just over two minutes, sir." The communications officer answered.

"Detach us from the hull of the Vengeance and get us out of here," Schull ordered. "When we return to the fleet we will let the Imperial court judge between Commander Vrendel and myself. This is a new Empire where every soldier counts." After speaking, Schull sat down in the shuttle's command chair.

The group of stormtroopers on the bridge nodded in agreement as the Rondirem began to power up her engines. The sound of the shuttle detaching from the dying ship echoed through the shuttle. The pilot powered up the engines and the

assault shuttle moved away from the doomed ship toward the approaching fleet.

* * * * *

Tesh sat down in the pilot's station aboard the Aeridian Flame and powered up the ship off of standby. Aut took up position in the co-pilot's station and Serrin sat behind them. He was in no position to fly. Serrin looked over at Tesh. "I am glad you got the ship out of deep storage for us. We would've never made it that far."

"As ordered," Tesh replied.

"Nice ship," Aut said, "almost as nice as mine."

"Thanks," Serrin said as he watched Tesh deactivate the mag-clamps holding the Flame to the inside of the Vengeance's underbelly. "We have about fifty seconds left before the Vengeance blows. Tesh, scan the area for enemy ships, I know the Empire will not be giving up on us that easy."

"As ordered," Tesh said. "I am showing multiple targets once we clear the Vengeance."

"Let's go," Aut urged.

Tesh powered up the sub-light engines and took the Flame out.

"Aut, bring up the shields to full," Serrin said. The sound of the shields reassured him as they cleared the wreckage of the Vengeance's docking bays. "Tesh, I want weapons ready."

"As ordered," Tesh said as he worked the console. "Lasers and concussion missiles ready. I must report, we are out of torpedoes."

Aut spoke up, “Serrin, these shields are still damaged from your last encounter. We only have thirty-five percent shields.”

“Understood,” Serrin replied as felt the Flame’s sub-light engines push to their max. The feeling of acceleration made his heart pound as the Flame moved away from the Vengeance. An eerie feeling of *deja vu* tickled at his consciousness.

He checked his scanners and noticed the Conquest was on an intercept course with the Vengeance. The bulk cruisers followed along with the system patrol craft and the other two assault shuttles leading. They were still five units away, but the TIE fighters were almost in range. The craft they had raided was moving away toward the fleet.

A man’s voice broke through on the comm, “Unidentified craft, this is the Imperial Star Destroyer Conquest. You are in violation of Imperial space and are ordered to shut down your engines and prepare to be boarded.”

“Tesh, give them our answer,” Serrin said.

Tesh’s metallic voice echoed into the comm, “This is the Aeridian Flame, request denied.” His finger touched the console and a concussion missile launched from the aft of the Flame and rocketed toward the incoming TIE fighters.

“This is Conquest, your defiance will cost you dearly.”

As the arrogant Imperial officer spoke the Vengeance shuttered. Fire exploded from the command tower and spread down the length of the Star Destroyer. The self-destruct system did its work and with a final cry of agony the Vengeance exploded in a huge ball of flame. The shock wave roared outward passing over numerous TIE fighters that had strayed to

close in their pursuit of the Flame. Serrin, Aut, and Tesh could hear cursing over the comm as the Rondirem reminded the fleet of the Vengeance's demise.

On board the Rondirem, the pilot struggled to keep the shuttle from bucking out of control. Lieutenant Dreug clung to the command chair as the ship rocked from the blast. Stormtroopers were flung across the bridge and circuits shorted out as the shock wave passed.

The Flame flew away from the exploding ship with all the speed she was worth. The shields held as the weakened shock wave passed her, and as the fire dissipated the roaring sub-lights of the Flame shown bright as she raced away from the Conquest and her Admiral.

Aut breathed out a sigh of relief and ran targeting information through its systems. "We have five targets coming in, TIE interceptors. Wow, they are really fast!"

"Yes, they are," Serrin said remembering his last encounter with them. "Tesh, light speed as soon as possible. Hopefully before we get captured again."

"As ordered."

The sound of a missile firing sounded. "One away!" Aut said. Serrin watched the concussion missile flash toward the incoming fighters. The impossible speed it closed was due to the ships' approach. The doomed TIE did not have any time for evasive maneuvers like it had before when the last missile was destroyed by the Vengeance's death. The missile smashed into the cockpit and exploded. The pilot just escaped the blast as he ejected.

The Flame's rear lasers opened up on the remaining four, as they approached. "We're not going to last long if they get close enough to fire," Aut said.

Serrin looked over at Tesh in desperation as the sound of TIE fighter laser cannons resounded through the ship, "Tesh!"

"Ready for light speed as ordered," Tesh replied.

"Go!" Serrin yelled as the Flame's shields collapsed and sparks were spat from fried circuits. Aut slammed down the lever for light speed and the Flame's engines flashed. The Flame shot forward and disappeared.

* * * * *

Admiral Sturdin stood on the bridge of the Conquest and cursed loudly as he watched his rival's ship streak forward and disappear into hyperspace. His anger exploded as he counted his losses. He shoved his attendant off his feet as he spun on his heel and stormed away from the viewport.

"Do you people realize how much we just lost here today! That rebel operative that escaped with that blasted pirate had information that would have funded our cause for years! Your incompetence will be punished!"

The Admiral punched the closest tactical officer and stalked over to the navigation console. "I want you to plot every possible destination on that ship's last known trajectory. I expect a report in one hour if not sooner!"

Sturdin's frustration made him feel like slaughtering the entire bunch of incompetent crew members, but through the haze of his rage he reminded himself that they were expensive commodities.

As quickly as the rage came, Admiral Sturdin composed himself and returned to his command chair and sat down. He mourned the loss of the *Vengeance* and her treasure, but there would come another time. He would succeed if it was the last thing he ever did in his life. Agent Relmar would reveal her secrets to him, and the Rebel Captain he hated so much would surely die.

Conclusion

The Aeridian Flame slowed and dropped out of hyperspace as she approached her destination. Serrin smiled. “What a sight.”

Aut smiled as Serrin looked over at her. It had been nine days since they had escaped Sturdin’s grasp. Aut had cleaned up, and her beautiful eyes reflected the site before them. “Yes, it is.” Her hair was combed back and over to one side and she wore a dark blue shirt and black breeches.

Through the cockpit Serrin and Aut watched as hundreds of ships moved around a huge Rebel Alliance base and a magnificent blue planet. Some were leaving, and like them, some were arriving. X-wings and A-wings flew out on patrol, and Mon Calamari battle cruisers stood a silent vigil around the base that was in orbit over the beautiful home world of their people.

Serrin was still bandaged and on meds, but he was in awe at the huge shipyards hovering near one of the Mon Calamari moons and all the supply ships and Rebel attack craft

holding position in designated areas. This was one of the main positions of Rebel power. Obviously, since the death of the Emperor and the splintering of the Imperial fleets, the Rebels would be making their presence widely known. The battle for supremacy was being fought, and the Alliance would be victorious because of their unity.

Serrin reached over and took Aut's hand in his. "I am glad you are here with me to see this place."

"Me too," Aut replied as she looked into his eyes, "me too."

Serrin smiled, returned his gaze toward the scene before them, reluctantly withdrew his hand, and piloted the Flame toward her designated landing bay at the Rebel base. There would be long hours of debriefing and briefing on the current state of the war. Serrin looked forward to the life to come. He had almost missed it.

About the Author

Daniel Bastion has a family and works in a non-literary career field. He has a lot of different interests and passions including fantasy, science fiction, gaming, reading, and writing.

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