

PROLOGUE

Lieutenant Commander Laro sat comfortably in the pilot's seat of the Tyderian-class Imperial shuttle *Aramis*. He and the three other shuttles Grand Admiral Ronin had dispatched had safely entered hyperspace. The first leg of their jump would take about an hour, and there was little he could do. At this point, the *Aramis* would pretty much fly itself.

Laro turned his chair, got up, and walked over to the passenger's lounge. The shuttle *Aramis* was a modified Tyderian-class Imperial shuttle, intended for VIP transport. As such, the passenger's compartment had been refitted with luxurious furniture for the comfort of whoever happened to be flying with him. He sat down on a sofa, put his boots on the table, leaned back, and relaxed as he closed his eyes. He could sit like this forever. Even though he'd been a personal trustee of Ronin's personal bodyguard, he wasn't entirely happy with his life. He could have almost everything he wanted, but sometimes he longed for the wealth Ronin himself had. Then again, he'd never get there.

His hand slid into the pocket of his uniform, and came back out with a data chip in his hand. He looked at it. Grand Admiral Ronin himself had given him this chip. Once aboard the Star Destroyer *Hammer*, he was to hand-deliver it to General Kaisin Mirtez, the commander of Beta squadron. Laro had already decided that wasn't going to happen though. This chip was worth a fortune, and he was tired of his salary. He wanted infinite luxury. Preferably on a moon of his own.

Still, there was a problem. He still needed to find a way to get it to his buyer. And he had to do it without the other shuttle pilots getting suspicious. He pondered. He had already figured out how to break the slave-circuit tying his shuttle to Commander Davir's. Now he just had to do at the right time, so that the alarm signal would not reach Davir's shuttle. Then, he could simply abort his hyperspace jump, and wait for his buyer. After business was completed, he'd simply return to Ronin. After all, he had no idea where to find the *Hammer*, or where the other shuttles would have jumped.

The slave circuit would do all the work. He'd been working on his cover story for several hours now, and was convinced Ronin and his goons would believe him.

A tremor went through the *Aramis* as it reverted back to realspace. Laro jumped up and quickly made his way to the cockpit.

"*Aramis* reporting in," he responded to Davir's call. "Ready for the second jump. All systems green." Davir acknowledged him, and Laro turned off the comms. He ducked below the console, and his fingers quickly found the two screws keeping a panel in place. He unscrewed them, and the next moment the panel slid against the bulkhead with a clang. Laro's fingers quickly found the slave-circuit, and wiggled all over it, trying to find the right wires. Laro smiled. Got them.

Patiently, he waited for the clock to tick down. After what seemed like hours, Davir's voice sounded through the cockpit. "Hyperspace jump in 10 seconds," he said. For a few moments, he remained silent, then he started counting down. "Five... four... three..."

Laro waited for 'one', closed his eyes, and pulled the wire he was holding from the circuit. A spark flew around, the steady whine of the slave-circuit died away, and the *Aramis* shuddered. For a moment Laro feared he'd been too late, and the *Aramis* had entered hyperspace, but he quickly realized he'd been right. The *Aramis* had not made the jump. Laro stood up and looked out the viewport. The other four shuttles were gone. He smiled. Success! He sat back down in his chair, keyed the comm, and sent out a signal. Then he waited.

The waiting didn't take long. After only a few moments, his computer sounded a signal -- another ship had just come out of hyperspace. He hit a switch, and the computer showed him a yellow blip, ten clicks out, and headed his way. He flicked another switch, and saw a familiar shape: a Xiytiar-class freighter. It looked old and battered. He smiled.

CHAPTER ONE -- MYRAS

The small Xiytiar freighter touched down on the landing pad, and a few moments later the main ramp quietly lowered. A few seconds later, a Mon Calamari walked down the ramp, with a Rodian and a Twi'lek in his wake. The Rodian's eyes anxiously shot from left to right, anticipating something worrisome. The Twi'lek looked nervous, but the Mon Calamari seemed like calmness itself. Steadily, he led his companions away from the shuttle and into one of the reception hallways of the spaceport on Myras.

Myras was another one of those backwater planets you'd rather not go to if you had the option. The small, virtually barren planet orbited a yellow dwarf star in the final stages of its 12 billion year lifecycle. Already, the color had started to shift to the red, and the outer layers of gas had started to expand, a precursor to the star's next phase in life: a red giant. Still, there were millions of years to go before the situation became a problem for the few permanent inhabitants of this rock.

It was here the riff raff of the galaxy had fled to since the demise of the Galactic Empire. In its early years, the struggling New Republic had not been a problem, but the more stable the government became, regardless of the odd conflict every now and then, the less inviting Republic space had been. Even Tatooine, once the home of the mighty Jabba Desilijic Tiure, aka Jabba the Hutt, and several hundred other petty crimelords, was no longer a safe haven. And so the smugglers had relocated themselves here, a small planet, beyond the reaches of the Republic. The planet was just within the borders of the territory of one of the Imperial remnants, but that gave little bother to anyone. These Imperial warlords were too busy bickering amongst themselves to pose a problem. Most believed that even if one of them were to attack Myras, the accumulated firepower of the smuggler's ships would be enough to drive them off.

Gareol, the Mon Calamari, had been here before many times. Sometimes to acquire a job, sometimes to offload some merchandise, and sometimes just to disappear for a short while. No matter how much someone wanted you, they'd be a fool to follow you here. Gareol knew his way around the Myras spaceport like the back of his hand, and even though the environment was considered extremely unfriendly to Mon Calamaris, sometimes he almost felt at home here. At one time he'd even figured out he had spent more time here, than on his home planet. And with his planet deep with Republic-controlled space, it was pretty much a given that was not going to change anymore.

Willick, the Rodian, however did not at all like this place. Ever since his first job on a smuggler's ship, when he was just an infant, he'd heard the horror stories of Myras. He had never taken to this place, and every time he set foot on the planet he couldn't wait to get off it again. His Rodian appearance wasn't much help there either -- small and skinny, a Rodian didn't exactly boast a scary appearance. Willick knew his lightning draw would probably get him out of a lot of skirmishes, but he was ever fearful of this place.

The Twi'lek, Dor Telos, had never before set foot on this world. He had taken up employ with the Mon Calamari because he needed the money. His daughter had been sold into slavery several years ago, and ever since he'd been bent on getting her back. By now, he figured the only way was acquiring enough credits to actually buy her from whoever happened to be her current owner. And since Twi'lek dancing girls were still very popular, the price was steep.

He didn't like the job. The stealing, the deception, and the occasional firefight or murder, but he had little choice in the matter. He tried to keep his cool on this planet, but he wasn't at ease at all. So he just followed the red-skinned aquatic before him, keeping his thoughts to himself.

Gareol led his companions to *The Junker*, his local favorite bar. He sat down in a booth in a corner, and signaled the bartender, a shabby looking humanoid. A few moments later, a young girl wearing some quite uneffective rags over her body approached their table. With her nicest smile, she asked

them which refreshments they would like. Gareol placed his order, and drooled as he fixed his eyes on the girl's backside as she walked over to the bar. The bartender smiled. He knew the Mon Calamari, and he reacted exactly as anticipated. Perhaps the girl would make him some more credits tonight...

After the girl had brought them their drinks, the three silently sat in the booth for awhile, the Rodian still not keeping his eyes straight. Finally, Gareol got tired of it, and planted his elbow in the Rodian's stomach. Willick gulped as he splurged half his drink from his mouth all over the table.

"Stop acting like a Toydarian without wings -- you're drawing attention to us," he bit. Willick swallowed as he bent his head down and tried very hard to stare at the bottom of his glass and not let his eyes wander off again.

"So when do we cash?" he asked. "I mean, this thing has got to be worth a lot, right. I mean, it's not every day you get your hands on an Imperial data chip."

Gareol smacked the Rodian again, harder this time, and Willick visibly cringed with pain. "Keep your trap shut, you son of a Hutt. Do you want half the planet after us?" Willick quietly nodded his head.

"Besides," Gareol said, "it's only a copy. If it was the original, we wouldn't be here now." Dor Telos moved his head close to the Mon Calamari. "So what is it?" he asked. Gareol shook his head. "Damned if I know," he responded. "The encryption on this is stronger than I've ever seen before. It's going to take a while to crack it..."

Dor Telos sighed. "I just hope you get it done. I doubt our customer will pay otherwise. Plus I wouldn't wanna run into whoever we pissed off here. I wanna get as far away from here as I can, as fast as I can."

Gareol chuckled. "Don't worry, Twi'lek. It's a matter of time before I crack this. And when we do, we will be handsomely rewarded. And your share will help your cause a great deal." The Twi'lek pondered these words, and decided he liked them. He took another sip of his drink, and leaned back in his chair.

Gareol glanced at the Twi'lek from the corners of his eyes, while pretending to be staring at the curved forms of the *Junker's* waitress. Dor Telos' behavior made him uneasy. Perhaps he'd made a mistake hiring the Twi'lek. Adding to that, Gareol had only recently learned of the reason the Twi'lek had entered the bounty hunting business. Gareol suspected the Twi'lek had too much at stake here, he needed the credits too much, and that made him unreliable.

His eyes switched over to the Rodian. Willick was visibly nervous. Far too nervous, and far too obvious. Gareol sighed. Both his companions were obviously not up for a risky operation like this. He didn't need such liabilities. He promised himself to ditch them at the earliest opportunity. There was no need to risk his life on companions like this.

CHAPTER TWO -- THE *HAMMER*

Dempsey read the report she had gotten from Viper Pred, TIE Corps Commander. Had she not been paying attention, she would never have known something was wrong. But, as it happened, she just happened to be in the ISD-II *Hammer's* hangar bay as the fifth shuttle dispatched by Ronin, the Tyderian-class shuttle *Aramis*, had finally arrived. An hour late. The disappearance of the shuttle's pilot had sparked her interest. Someway, the shuttle had managed to find its way to its destination on auto-pilot. She wasn't an expert on navigational computers, but she knew enough to realize that was a pretty amazing stunt to pull. So she had requested a full report from Pred.

Now, several hours later, she was reading with growing interest. The evidence was quite clear: someone had made a copy of the data disk with the orders from Ronin. Dempsey's interest peaked the moment she had heard the shuttles were carrying orders from Ronin. Dempsey had only known Ronin to get actively involved with the Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet once, and that was when the very existence of the Fleet was at stake. For the rest, the former Fleet Commander pretty much kept to himself, and was rarely seen leaving the private moon to which he had retired several years ago. So why would he get involved in a minor internal test of skills, like the *Raise the Flag* wargames? And although for the internal wargames these secret orders held great importance, why would anyone else be interested in them enough to isolate one of the shuttles, overpower the pilot, copy the data, and then send the shuttle on its way?

Dempsey stared at the screen. So many questions, so few answers. What worried her most were the repercussions of this. She couldn't care less about someone stealing the data. The data was not at all important, and whoever had taken it would get himself into a whole lot of trouble when trying to sell it as such. What worried her was the audacity with which this attack had been executed. The mere fact that someone had been skilled enough to separate one shuttle from the other four without raising alarm, and then the ability to reprogram an Imperial navigation computer to send the shuttle

to the *Hammer*. The perpetrator could only have done that if he had been able to extract the *Hammer's* location from that very same navigation computer. Whoever it was, he would have to be neutralized. And fast, before he would get his hands on some real sensitive data.

Dempsey keyed the comm in her quarters and contacted the main hangar bay. "Dempsey here. Prepare my transport for departure. I want it ready to leave in five minutes." She didn't wait for an answer, switched off the display before her, and headed out of the small room.

Eight minutes later, the modified transport *Andromeda* glided through the force field keeping the hangar bay pressurized, and Dempsey steered away from the Imperial Deuce. She fed her hyperdrive the coordinates where the shuttle pilots of the other four shuttles reported they had lost contact with the *Aramis*, and when the computer signaled the calculations for the jump were completed, she punched the hyperdrive. The stars quickly turned into lines, and the transport accelerated to well beyond light speed.

CHAPTER THREE -- THE DUG

A few hours after having entered *The Junker*, the threesome walked out again. Their entire stay had been quiet and uneventful. Gareol had flirted with the young waitress, and had spiked her a few credits in tips. Just as he handed them to her, he had dropped them, completely by accident and unintended of course, and he had ogled her some more as she bent over to pick them up. He could still see the flesh under the rags and he smiled. Those had been credits well spent.

He led his companions back to the docking port where he had left his ship. But as he turned the corner, he froze. The moment he came around the corner, his eyes caught the shape of two Barabels standing awfully close to his ship. He stopped dead in his tracks, causing Willick, who was once again paying more attention to everything but what was going on before his eyes, to smash into him.

Gareol smacked the Rodian again, and stepped back behind the corner. He turned to his companions and whispered: "Barabels, two of them. What are those Sithspawn doing here?"

Dor Telos shrugged. "Coincedence?" he suggested. "Perhaps they're just passing through." Gareol shook his head. "I don't believe in coincidence like this. Not when they're hovering around my ship like that."

Willick swallowed. "So what do we do now?" Gareol pondered. "Barabels are too stupid to do anything on their own. There must be someone else they're working for. But I've not heard of anyone who would dare show his face here who actually used Barabels."

The three looked at each other for a moment. Then Willick's eyes grew to what appeared to be at least three times their original size. Gareol spun around, but too late. One of the Barabels towered over him, and grabbed the Mon Calamari's neck. "My boss wants words with you," he hissed in bad Basic. Willick's hand shot towards his weapon, but another big fist smacked him between the eyes. "No cheat, Rodian," the second Barabel hissed. And before Dor Telos realized what happened, the two Barabels headed back towards the Xiytiar freighter Gareol had brought them on. Dor Telos quickly followed them. He didn't enjoy the prospect of having to fight two

Barabels on his own -- the Rodian was out cold, and pretty useless -- but he had to do something. It didn't look like Gareol was going to be able to overcome them, and something made him doubt the Barabels would let him walk away unharmed.

Gareol gasped for breath as the Barabel dragged him towards his freighter. Just as he felt he was about to pass out, the Barabel released his grip, and Gareol dropped to the ground. As he lay there, he opened his eyes a bit, and looked at two hands standing on the ferrocrete. He glanced up, and saw two feet, followed by one of the ugliest heads he'd ever seen. Somewhere in the far reaches of his mind, he recognized the species, even though he'd never actually seen one in person. He'd even been under the impression that the Dugs had been extinct since the Clone Wars. But here he was, face to face with a live one. And one that didn't look particularly pleased.

"You are in possession of something I wish to have," the Dug said, trying to sound polite. And although the words certainly conveyed politeness, his tone didn't. And even if it had, the two Barabels towering over him would have given the Dug's intent away. "Now I know you will tell me you do not have what I want, or that you do not know what I am talking about, but you and I both know what happens then. Garagahr and Verigger here will attempt to make you see the error of your ways, and we both know how finely tuned a Barabel can be. So why don't we just skip all that unpleasantness, and cut to the chase. I want that data disk you stole from that Imperial shuttle, and I want it now. We've searched your ship, but it appears to not be there."

The words barely registered in Gareol's mind. The pain that was now coursing through his body distracted him, as did the realization that the several thousand credits he was promised for delivery of this item would now never come. As much as he wanted to believe otherwise, he already knew the game was over. He would not be able to take out both Barabels, and he had no idea about the Dug's abilities, but he was pretty sure that the Dug had some surprises.

"Data disk?" he tried, weakly. The Dug only smiled, and gave a nod with his head so small Gareol didn't even register it. A fraction later, a searing pain tore through his leg, as one of the Barabels jumped into the air, and landed with his full weight on Gareol's leg. The Dug smiled as he heard the splintering of Gareol's bones. The look of pain in Gareol's face also helped.

"Now, you see what you have forced me to do?" he said. "This pain would all have been averted had you not acted so stupidly. And so I ask you again: where is the data disk?"

Gareol's mind raced. He wasn't yet about to give up on his prize, but he didn't see any other options, not if he wanted the smallest chance of getting away with his life.

A blast barely distracted him, as Dor Telos had come up behind the Barabels and fired his blaster. The blast buried deep into the skull of the bigger of the two Barabels, the one still standing on Gareol's pulverized leg. For a moment the Barabel stood frozen, and then his lifeless body toppled over. Gareol swallowed as the huge body smacked down on the ground right beside him. If the Barabel had fallen on top of him...

The second Barabel howled as he turned around, swinging a large blade around him. But fortunately, Tor Delos had taken position outside the Barabel's range. He turned his blaster towards the second Barabel, and pulled the trigger. A second blast ionized some air, and Dor Telos' eyes widened. Then his grip loosened and the blaster fell to the ground. Both he and the Barabel stared at the black burn on his chest. Then his knees gave out, and his dead body slumped to the ground. A few meters away, the Dug smiled as he hid his blaster back under his garments as if nothing had happened.

"Garagahr, we had better hurry," the Dug said. "There is not much here as to authorities, but I doubt this will go unnoticed. Bring him." The Dug pointed towards Gareol's body, and turned around, quickly moving. Garagahr picked up Gareol, and threw him over his shoulder. The sudden movement caused him to lose consciousness.

CHAPTER FOUR -- COLD TRAIL

Dempsey's transport reverted back to realspace at the location provided by Commander Davir, who had been in command of the five shuttles from Ronin. She throttled down, and the *Andromeda* came to a full stop. Dempsey got up from her seat, and left the cockpit. The compartment behind the cockpit looked nothing like the cargo hold it had once been, before the Science Office had gotten their hands on the craft. Now bustling with computers, the *Andromeda* was continuously monitoring the outside world with over a hundred external sensors, hidden within its second shell.

Dempsey sat down, put on some headphones, and started messing about with the plethora of switches. Several monitors before her started blurting out information, which she quickly absorbed. Her mind was racing through all the possibilities, but the information provided no useful details. Frankly, she hadn't expected otherwise. She punched a few buttons to start a deep scan of the system, and took off the headphones. She got up, and moved on to the office compartment. The compartment was lined with real wood, the only extravagant thing about the office. Despite its barren appearance, undecorated walls showing the bare quadanium steel, and a durasteel flooring, the office was more luxurious than what the Captain of an Imperial-class Star Destroyer had. It was Dempsey's home away from home, the Victory II-class Star Destroyer *Sinister*. Dempsey sat down in the luxury seat in the corner of the office, and closed her eyes. She concentrated hard, searching the system for remnants of anything she could pick up. The past two years, she had trained her Force senses quite extensively, and had become quite the powerful Jedi. She envisioned the space outside the *Andromeda*, the cold black nothing, and started stirring around.

For several hours, she meticulously prodded the emptiness around her, looking for any hints, but nothing solid came of it. At one point she felt the echo of fear and death, a recent one at that, and she believed she had sensed the *Aramis'* pilot in his final moments of life. Regardless of whether she was right, it would not help her.

Eventually, she gave up. She opened her eyes again, and got out of the chair. A cold shiver ran down her body. The coldness of space had not completely gone past her. She headed back for the second compartment, and sat down again behind several monitors. She started going over the readings her sensor sweep had gathered in the past two hours.

After several hours of sifting through useless bits of data, she froze the screen. One of the sensors had picked up a tiny trail. An energy signature. She fed the signature to the analyzer, and let it run its course. The analyzer needed another hour, but finally came up with the first bit of useful information she had seen all day. The energy signature belonged to a Xiytiar-class light freighter. Dempsey sighed. There were thousands of freighters of that type in use in Emperor's Hammer space alone, and there was no guarantee that this signature didn't belong to one of the countless freighters from outside this region.

Dempsey checked the chronometer. Almost a full day had passed since she had left the *Hammer's* hangar bay. Reluctantly, Dempsey admitted to herself she wasn't going to learn more here. She moved back to the cockpit of the *Andromeda*, and plotted a course back for the Star Destroyer *Hammer*.

CHAPTER FIVE -- DEATH

The Dug and his Barabel had brought Gareol to his own freighter, the Xiytiar-class freighter *Dac's Sunshine*, named after Gareol's home world. As soon as they were aboard, they had locked Gareol in the cargo hold, and departed from the Myras spaceport. Now, in the safety of deep space, far away from any space lanes, the Dug turned his attention back to the crippled Calamari.

"Now, where were we?" he mockingly asked, the Barabel Garaghar by his side. "Ah yes, you were going to tell us where you have hidden that Imperial data disk." The Dug walked over to Gareol, and moved his head close to Gareol's ears. "I suggest you not try my patience much more," he hissed. "I am running out very swiftly now, and I do have other opportunities to pursue. If you do not wish another encounter with Garagahr, I suggest you stop playing the idiot and tell me what I want to know."

Gareol winced in pain as he raised his head. "Never mind," he managed to say. "You're gonna kill me anyway, so why bother." The Dug smiled. "Because your death can be either swift and painless, or slow and excruciatingly painful," he said. "I am quite proficient in the finer arts of interrogation."

Gareol wasn't surprised, he figured the Dug would make such a threat. He also was unsure of what to do next. Willick had the data disk, and Gareol had no idea where Willick was. He knew Dor Telos was dead by now, and the Dug had not bothered bringing Willick with them. He could of course tell the Dug this, but he was pretty sure he would not be believed. And that would mean bad things. Or he could stay silent, pretend not to know anything, but that would lead to the same. And that wasn't a nice prospect.

For five minutes, it was silent in the transport's cargo hold. Then the Dug got tired of waiting. "I will not ask nicely again," he bit to Gareol. "Give me that disk. Now!" The Barabel took a step closer to Gareol, who closed his eyes. If ever, this was the moment for a brilliant idea.

Before Gareol could respond to the Dug, a siren started wailing through the ship. Gareol opened his eyes, and saw the Dug and the Barabel look at each other. Then a loud bang made the freighter shudder, and both of them fell off their feet. Another bang, another shudder. The Dug quickly got up and raced towards the cockpit. A moment later his voice sounded through the ship. "We're under attack!" The Dug's face appeared from the cockpit. "Garagahr, get up here, man the defense cannons."

So they had found his modifications, Gareol realized. Good. He didn't know who was shooting at them, but he didn't like it. A moment later he heard the hissing of the external shields being raised, and the familiar blazing of his ship's turbolasers. He had to admit, the Dug was a pretty good pilot. Despite hearing heavy fire, the ship didn't receive a single hit.

However, Gareol didn't keep to the floor, admiring the Dug's piloting skills. Still in pain, and every move causing more, he slowly crawled towards the side of the ship, where a compartment was hidden behind a bulkhead. From it, he took a small blaster. He checked the charge and smiled. Still fully charged. Finally his precautions paid off. He slowly rose to his feet, and supported by the bulkheads moved towards the cockpit. Once there, he raised the gun and aimed it at the Barabel's head. He pulled the trigger, and the next moment the Barabel's brains splashed against the transparisteel viewport. The stench of burnt flesh quickly took over the ship, while the Dug hollered. He turned and reached for his own weapon, but stopped still when he found himself staring down the barrel of Gareol's blaster. Gareol's mouth formed a weak smile, the Dug's eyes grew wide, and a moment later the Dug's lifeless body slumped out of the pilot's seat. The next moment the freighter rocked again, and Gareol smacked into the viewport, his face covered in the Barabel's fried brains. He wiped the goo from his face, trying to keep the contents of his digestive track where they belonged, and sank into the pilot's seat.

A few glances told him he was fine. Shields were holding so far, and the outer hull appeared to be undamaged. Gareol switched his attention to the threat indicators, suppressing a moan of pain as his crushed leg objected to the sudden and strong movements. Gareol cursed under his breath as he scrolled through the ships attacking him. Several old Z-95 Headhunters were approaching his aft, while several R-41 Starchasers were coming up from the front. He saw the blue streaks of the R-41s

ion cannons, bouncing harmlessly off his shields. Well, harmlessly... they did bring the shields down a bit. Still, the *Dac's Sunshine* would be able to withstand this fire for awhile.

Quickly, Gareol punched the navigation computer, and entered some coordinates. As the computer started doing its calculations, a high pitched whine overshadowed the siren. Gareol immediately pulled the yoke, and the freighter made a staggered jump. Gareol's leg protested even louder, and stars appeared before his eyes. *Keep it together*, he thought. *Pass out now and you're dead for sure*. He swallowed back the pain, and punched up his targeting computer. The computer quickly found the torpedo that had barely missed him. Making a wide turn, the torpedo's homing sensors had locked onto the Xiytiar, and were trying to steer the torpedo back towards its target. Gareol brought up the flares, and fired a handful. He banked the freighter again, and a weak shudder a few moments later told him the torpedo had met one of the flares.

He punched up the nearest target, locked it in the targeting computer, and set the main turbolaser on the ship's topside to automatic firing mode. It was far less effective than firing the weapon manually, but he was alone, and he couldn't pilot the ship and be the gunner at the same time. The steady firing of the cannons however, made short work of the small Headhunter. Two direct hits, and the fighter disappeared into a ball of fire. Gareol pulled up one of the Starchasers, and locked it into the computer. Immediately, the cannons swivelled and started firing at the small bomber. The first direct hit all but obliterated its shields, and it aborted its attack run. Gareol smiled.

A small beep signaled him the computer had finished its hyperspace calculations, and he pulled the lever. Smoothly, the *Dac's Sunshine* made the jump to hyperspace.

CHAPTER SIX -- DEAD END

After her return to the Star Destroyer *Hammer*, High Admiral Dempsey quickly made her way to the ship's bridge. There, she met with Frodo March. Her old friend was watching over the wargames from the bridge of the TIE Corps flagship, and kept track of the progress of the different squadrons.

"Dempsey." Frodo nodded as the Tactical Officer approached him.

"Nothing," Dempsey said. "The pilot is dead, but I was unable to trace the offenders." Frodo nodded. "I suspected as much. Too much time has passed. You Jedi have some nice tricks up your sleeves, but you can't do everything. Still, thanks for trying."

Dempsey looked at the display Frodo was staring at. "How are the games coming along?" Frodo smiled. "Delta and Epsilon are doing fine. But so far they're no match for the Dream Team."

Dempsey smiled. "The Dream Team?"

Frodo turned and pointed at a comms officer. "Get Mirtez and Prower on the line," he said. "I wanna know why their squadrons are not yet participating." The young officer nodded, and turned away.

"So how big do you anticipate the threat to be?" he asked, bringing his attention back to Dempsey. Dempsey shrugged. "I'd be a lot happier knowing who is responsible for this. And I've already sent a message to Cyric and Ronin that it might be a good idea to start putting a fighter escort on our shuttles. Whoever managed to pull this off has got some nice skills."

"We'll get him," Frodo pondered. "Sooner or later they're gonna be taking too many risks, screw up, and we'll be there waiting for them."

"I just hope that happens before they manage to get some actual information."

Frodo nodded in agreement. "Well, unless we run into some more clues, we're drawing a blank here. I've had my best men go over that shuttle top to bottom. We found nothing at all. Whoever's been aboard that shuttle knew exactly what he was doing. Every detachment out there is keeping its ears open for anything, no matter how insignificant it may seem. I don't have much hope though. If

they can pull this off without leaving a trace, they won't be bragging about it in some backwater spaceport."

"Admirals," came the voice of Major RichyV, newly appointed Wing Commander of the *Hammer's* Wing I. Frodo and Dempsey turned their heads, and nodded. "Commander Davir requests permission to depart. He wants to take the *Aramis* back to Grand Admiral Ronin."

Frodo pondered. "I doubt there's much more we can do with that shuttle anyway," he said. "We've gone over that thing four times. There's nothing more to learn." He paused. "Permission granted. Wish him a safe journey and tell him to convey our greetings to the Grand Admiral." RichyV saluted, and turned around, heading back to the turbolift.

Dempsey crossed the bridge of the Star Destroyer and took a stance before the main viewport. In the distance, she could see the outline of one of the Golan III orbital defense platforms orbiting the Hammer's capital world of Aurora Prime. Small flickers of light betrayed the TIE starfighters patrolling the Aurora system. After all, Aurora may be one of the most heavily defended targets in the known galaxy, but such an attack was not unheard of. Her mind strayed.

"Dempsey!" Frodo's voice snapped her back to the reality of the day. She turned her head. "I'd like you to return to the *Sinister* and bring it here," Frodo pointed to a spot on his map. "We're planning a furball for several pilots, I'd like you to oversee that." Dempsey nodded. "Will do," she said, as she started for the turbolift. The prospect of returning to the *Sinister* was a joyous one.

EPILOGUE

The stormtrooper with designation TK-2157 Delta was walking through the sand-covered streets of yet another half-deserted spaceport. He'd seen spaceports like this too much the past few days -- this was the fifth planet they'd sent him to, and spaceport number seven. They all looked the same. A few landing pads, freighters that appeared to have been past their prime since the Clone Wars era, and shabby looking figures scurrying about, trying hard to avoid his attention. Sometimes he just wanted to grab his blaster rifle and end their miserable lives. The only thing stopping him was the knowledge is detachment commander wouldn't appreciate that. The days of the Galactic Empire, where such an action could easily be taken and go unpunished, were long gone.

He sighed, as he entered yet another bar. The bars on these planets all looked the same, just as their spaceports did. Several booths against the walls, all dimly lit, where all sorts of alien scum could sit and do business without being seen by the other customers.

The one difference between this one and the others was the waitress. The other bars usually had worn out aliens fatter than your average Hutt running the bar, with a droid or two doing the waiting tables. This one had a human girl. As he stood in the doorway he took another look at her. Definitely human. Perhaps if she got a bit cleaned up, she'd look good. At the moment, torn rags barely covered her dirty body. He smiled. He could have some fun with her. He'd probably be back long before he was due. Besides, he wasn't going to learn anything here anyway. The girl looked at him. A faint smile curved her lips, and he could swear she could see right through his helmet. He took a few steps towards her, forgetting all about his assignment.