

“Acquisition Cost”

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He could hear everything, but dared not open his eyes. To do so would acknowledge this Human’s insane request, and to acknowledge it would be to accept it. So he kept his eyes closed, a weary barrier between himself and the crazy galaxy beyond.

Besides, Peteck didn’t need his weak vision to know what was happening in the room around him. The Human in front of him who was talking, Lt. Taures, was optimistic, almost upbeat. The three other beings with her were mostly quiet, with only faint sounds of their weight shifting, but a sense of low-key, slightly amused resignation drifted off of them as if they had all been through this many times before. The subtle individual flavors of their shared emotion varied due to their different species’ physiological and electromagnetic makeups, and Peteck’s sensory cones picked all of it up. The Rodian’s energy was more blunt, while the Twi’lek’s was smoother. The Clawdite’s energy hummed and shifted.

Taures didn’t seem to notice Peteck’s reluctance and finally concluded her excited explanation by asking, “So whatcha think?” There was an eager expectation behind the question.

With that, Peteck unfortunately couldn’t avoid the craziness any longer. The Gotal slowly opened his eyes and regarded the Rebel squad leader. Taures’s skin and short hair were dark, and she was nearly as tall as he was, though he was short for his species. She’d gotten a scar near one eye since the last time he’d seen her, but it must not have been recent: Peteck couldn’t detect any “hot” localized energy associated with it, as if the injury was still healing. Her unorthodox plans were going to get her killed one of these days, and though he didn’t say it aloud, Peteck didn’t like that idea at all.

Peteck took a moment to marshal his thoughts; he wasn’t sure he wanted to enable one of these notorious plans. “So let me get this straight,” he said carefully at last. “You want me to get you three rolls of Flex-5 detonite tape, a liquid cable dispenser, five liters of black paint, a fusion cutter, a jetpack, a set of stormtrooper armor, a swoop, and an operational old B1 Battle Droid?”

“Yeah,” Taures replied.

“And you want me to get you all of this by midnight tonight.”

“Right.”

“And this is on top of my existing assignment that I was working on before you unexpectedly showed up, which is obtaining a half ton of food and ten crates of blaster packs for your capital ship.”

“I guess so.”

“Even though getting you all of those unusual things will likely mean I’ll use up all my tricks in this city and be a bit too visible, which in turn means I’ll have to relocate tomorrow and start all over on my regular assignment?”

Taures’s grin faltered, but then she brightened again. “What if we help you get the stuff for your regular assignment?”

“When?” Peteck asked. “When you’re being chased off-world by the Imperials after this

little non-covert op of yours?”

“No, no, no.” Taures shook her head. “*During* our little non-covert op. We’ll lift the stuff from inside the Imperial base for you. One more mission objective won’t hurt.” Despite her words, there was a small groan from the three other Rebel soldiers with her. Taures ignored them.

“Do you have credits to purchase any of these things with?” Peteck asked.

“Do we ever?” Taures replied. She paused, and then Peteck felt her ratchet up her charisma and pleading persuasion. “Come on, Peteck, this plan will work perfectly, but without that stuff it doesn’t have a chance. You can get anything. I’ve seen you do it. We need your help. Please. What do you say?”

Peteck sighed. Being a procurement specialist in the field for the Rebellion was the most thankless job he knew of. The operations personnel always needed everything *now now now* and had no regard for just how hard and time-consuming it was to find and acquire things with little available funding and while being actively pursued by a galactic military force. It’s like they expected him to materialize these things out of thin air... unless he happened to be in the hard vacuum of space, in which case he’d *first* be expected to find some thin air in which to pull everything else out of.

“Why didn’t you bring some of this stuff with you from your ship in the first place?” Peteck countered.

Taures shrugged. “Didn’t know we’d need it. It’s hard to form the right plan without setting eyes on the target first.”

“And you can’t figure out a good plan that doesn’t involve jetpacks or B1 Battle Droids?”

The look of wounded pride Taures affected was completely fake. “Yes, I can figure out a ‘good’ plan without them. But not a *brilliant* plan. This is a *brilliant* plan.”

“What’s the difference?” Peteck asked.

Taures shrugged again, almost casually. “Good plans are more dangerous than brilliant plans.” Taures aimed an exaggerated, big brown-eyed look of entreaty at Peteck, but despite the external act, Peteck picked up on the twinge of genuine protectiveness Taures felt for her squad.

Blast it. Peteck closed his eyes once more and rubbed his face. He’d fallen into the emotional trap, and he of all beings should have known better.

But Taures wasn’t alone here. There were three other beings to consider before making significant decisions based on a bit of emotion. Peteck concentrated, trying to get a better sense of how they felt about all this.

The energy of Rez, the Rodian, was whirling everywhere, acting like a clumsy bantha in a small, prize-winning garden enclosure. She’d seemed to already accept that they were doing the mission and felt distracted, probably oblivious to the smaller, minor details like what items they would have at their disposal.

The Twi’lek, Slevi, had a sense of feeling like he was about to embark on an adventure. He hadn’t changed. From the other times Peteck had briefly worked with him, he remembered thinking that to Slevi, finding out when or how things would go sideways was just part of that adventure.

Essem was the Clawdite, and he was in his natural reptilian form at the moment. He was a little harder to read at a “glance” since he was more disciplined with his energy, but there was nothing Peteck could pick up from him that felt like a serious objection to the proposed situation.

There was also one other undercurrent of shared emotion in the squad that Peteck noticed now that he was paying closer attention: they trusted her. Though they had teased Taures’s

oddball plans in the past and would continue to do so in the future, they were willing to join her on another, for reasons only they knew.

Peteck groaned inwardly. He'd been hoping to find a solid reason to say no that Taures would listen to— in other words, a squad member's dissension— but he hadn't. And without that... well, he figured she could sell sand to a Jawa on Tatooine if she tried. He was really going to regret this. "Fine. I'll help," he muttered.

Instant jubilation hit his sensory cones. "Great!" Taures clapped him on the shoulder, and Peteck opened his eyes. "You won't regret this," Taures promised. "And we'll get you your food and blaster packs while we're inside too. It's a small price to pay if this extra-curricular project will cause problems for you with it."

Peteck didn't reply. He knew Taures meant it, but he'd learned the hard way not to hold non-Gotals to verbal agreements they'd made as a result of a fleeting emotional impulse when they were desperate for something. Non-Gotals weren't aware of how much they were communicating for better or for worse, and by the same token, they were unaware of the majority of what he was communicating to them as well. He missed the full, deep, intimate, two-way interactions that came naturally with other Gotals. Vocal conversations with non-Gotals barely scratched the surface of communication and mutual understanding. How could other beings live like that all the time? Having to guess how others were really feeling, and likely being wrong more often than not? And making decisions and taking action based on those misinterpretations? No wonder the galaxy was so full of misunderstandings and vendettas. No wonder the Empire was able to exist and grow.

"You always help us out so much," Taures continued, obliviously breaking him out of yet more acute loneliness that another Gotal would have picked up on before even walking through his door. "I've told you before that I'd love to have you join my squad permanently, and I still mean it. The five of us would be a force to be reckoned with."

Peteck had been afraid she'd bring that up again, mostly because that loneliness made him long to agree to the proposal. He'd gotten tired of being alone on this planet, a Gotal in a non-Gotal world who didn't fit in, didn't belong, and physically stuck out everywhere he went, to the detriment of his job. The mere thought of relocating yet again to another city because he would have to show his face a bit too much that day in possibly suspicious situations just frustrated and exhausted him. Taures's squad members weren't Gotals, but he liked them and could see himself finding some common ground of understanding with them that would be a whole lot better than what he had in his life now. But Taures's squad relied on stealth for their missions, and as he was well aware, there was absolutely nothing stealthy about him. At best, he'd be useless with them. At worst, he'd attract attention and, therefore, danger.

It wouldn't work, either for him or for them. To reiterate that in his head, Peteck also reminded himself of the other reason he'd said no in the past: at least his independence meant his life was his own responsibility. Going to a lifestyle that constantly relied on stunted communications and misinterpreted emotional decisions of other beings for his very survival sounded just as appealing as the last time Taures had brought it up, which was to say, completely not.

And that was true. But...

"No, thanks," Peteck said, squashing that "but" as a bad idea yet again. "In fact," he mused, doubling down against that persistent bad idea, "I think when I relocate tomorrow, I won't tell you where my new place is so you can't do any more of these unexpected drop-ins."

Taures grinned. It was almost infectious. "Not to worry. I'll get your new location info

from your point of contact on the ship like I did this time.”

Even in a place like this with many different types of humanoids, Peteck was acutely aware of how much he stood out, and every physical difference was an external reminder of how cut-off he felt from everyone else. He was larger than most of them, and few had blond-grey fur or a shaggy grey mane like he did. Even fewer had anything remotely resembling the two electromagnetic-sensitive sensory cones on his head. Most other beings’ hands were pitifully dainty compared to his, and he usually felt like a lumbering brute among so many smaller, smooth-skinned, frail-looking sentients. The relative rarity of Gotals here compared to species like Humans, Zabracks, and Duros meant that he often had to keep moving: he was noticeable, and when he was noticed, he was remembered. When he was remembered, he couldn’t do his job.

And this, Peteck mused sourly, was precisely *not* the way to stay inconspicuous on this planet.

The Gotal, Human, Clawdite, Rodian, and Twi’lek were all crammed together in his landspeeder as Peteck piloted it down the less-frequented side roads of town. Luckily the squad members were wearing civilian clothes. The only reason they were all able to fit inside the vehicle was that Peteck had needed a larger landspeeder in general to accommodate his bigger size more comfortably. And the only reason they were all together in the speeder to begin with was because Taures had insisted on “helping” and had refused to take no for an answer no matter how many times Peteck told her he didn’t want “help” and worked better alone. Finally he’d given in to avoid wasting more time. He was short enough on it as it was.

Rez had been taking the opportunity to familiarize herself with the town and surrounding area from where she sat in the front passenger seat she’d been intent on claiming when they left. The cool, murky day made the town seem even more bleak than usual, but she didn’t seem to care. Her huge pupil-less eyes peered intently out the windows as they drove, like she intended to memorize every detail, and her two small antennae quivered as if straining to catch whatever her eyes missed, those lazy lowlifes. “There are a lot of speeder taxis parked there,” Rez remarked as they went past the congregating vehicles. “What’s special about that place?”

“It’s a good central spot for picking up passengers in this area. Lots of stores here,” Peteck replied, long since resigned to playing tour guide and answering all her questions.

“And the side streets are one-way, but the main roads are two-way, right?”

“Yeah.”

Rez nodded, then pointed out the windshield with a long, pale green, suction-cup-tipped finger. “What’s that tall building there? The five-story one?”

“It’s a bank.”

Rez grimaced, an odd expression on a Rodian. “So their security will be tighter. Know of any good tall places with accessible roof access?”

Peteck glanced at her. “For what?”

“In case we need high cover or on-the-go shuttle pickup or something.”

“How should I know?”

Rez shrugged but continued soaking up their surroundings. “Just figured you’d know the town better than us.”

A mild, nonhostile sensation accompanied the words, but Peteck grew annoyed all the same. He *did* know the town much better than they did. They’d only just arrived on-planet from their ship, and he lived here. For one more night, anyway. The reminder made him bristle inside.

“I don’t exactly look at places wondering if I can put a sniper up on them,” he replied. “I pay more attention to escape routes and side entrances.”

Slevi leaned forward from the cramped back seat and poked his pale *lekku*-ed head between Peteck and Rez. “Always good information to have. So where are we going again?” Slevi asked curiously.

“*I’m* going to the place most likely to have a jetpack for you crazy people,” Peteck replied. “*You* are all staying in the speeder.”

“I might scout around a bit while we’re waiting,” Rez said offhandedly, her head still swivelling back and forth between windows.

“No, *all of you* are staying in the speeder,” Peteck countered. “I know you all well enough to know that your wandering around causes complications, and I really need to minimize complications while I’m doing this kind of thing.”

“That’s fine, Peteck. Rez, we’ll stay in the speeder,” Taures said from beside Slevi.

Mollified, Peteck returned his attention to the road.

Before too long, he turned down the street to the outskirts of the small local spaceport. It wasn’t the main spaceport used by most beings in the city nearby, and it was rarely used by the Imperials either. Its biggest user, in fact, was the company housed in the blocky building Peteck parked in front of alongside numerous other landspeeders.

Slevi leaned forward again and read the sign above the door while Peteck powered down the speeder. “AtmoXtreme?” he asked.

Peteck nodded. “They take customers out from here a lot. Atmo skydiving, orbital space-diving, zero-g sports and lessons, things like that. They’re even building a pod-racing track down the road. Now stay here. I won’t be long.”

Peteck got out and went to the landspeeder’s aft cargo compartment where he’d stashed what he figured he would need for this and some of the other procurements that day. First he pulled on his business jacket over his dress shirt and pants and combed his mane for a more professional appearance, then he grabbed the appropriate ID, his datapad prop, and the small forged sticker that was the key to everything. He manipulated the sticker so it was positioned correctly on a thin, clear band that he wrapped around his left thumb so his fur wouldn’t interfere, and he adjusted the band until the sticker was in place on the fleshy part of his thumb.

Directing his attention toward the building, he concentrated a moment, but he thankfully didn’t detect anything that felt like a large cluster of electromagnetic fields associated with living beings from inside. Of course, at this distance and with his four companions’ EM fields nearby drowning everything out, it was hard to tell. Finally Peteck closed the cargo compartment, collected himself, and purposefully strode into AtmoXtreme, datapad in hand.

The lobby was quiet, and the half-empty bags of gear and personal effects sitting near the lockers on the wall meant that he had indeed timed it perfectly: most of the personnel were out with a group of customers. The only being in sight was a young adult Human sitting at the front desk. She was probably not long past adolescence, and her skin was a couple shades lighter than Taures’s. The Human looked up when the door opened, and when she saw Peteck she quickly put down a datapad she’d been reading. Her curly hair bobbed a bit as she did so, and her aura projected pleasant friendliness. “Hello. How can I help you?” the Human asked.

Peteck exuded an air of calm authority while he walked in. If there had been another Gotal there instead, they would have immediately sensed all of the electromagnetic signals and nuances that would have told them exactly how calm and authoritative Peteck was feeling at that moment, but as it was, he had to consciously demonstrate and sometimes exaggerate everything

outwardly in his posture, facial expressions, voice, and even eye contact so the non-Gotals had even a slight possibility of picking up on it, assuming they were even paying attention. He often felt like he was shouting into a windy world full of beings with no hearing, just for the chance that one of them might hear enough and understand even a fraction of what he was feeling and communicating. It was exhausting. And lonely.

But on the other hand, those same intimate nuances and signals meant there was no way he'd ever be able to con a Gotal like he was about to try to do with this Human.

Peteck stepped up to the Human at the desk and smiled, though the artificial, learned expression came out more awkward than Peteck would have liked. "Hello. I'm from the Office of Public Safety and Health." He flashed his fake ID and badge at the young woman, but not long enough for the Human to absorb many details. "I'm here for the scheduled audit."

"Audit?" The Human's aura pinged with confusion.

"Yes, audit. A government inspection. I had it scheduled with the manager for this time today." Peteck kept his voice calm and neutral while he paid attention to the emotional feedback he was getting from the Human. Then he'd know the best approach to take to manipulate those emotions and get what he needed.

"But... Mr. Ritlan didn't tell me anything about it. He didn't say you'd be coming." There was no defiance in the Human's words, only greater confusion and some anxiety.

Peteck used that confusion and nervousness to his advantage; besides, this was a lot easier to deal with than belligerence or hostility. He frowned slightly. "I see. I'm sure it was just a miscommunication. I hope he didn't forget, since the audit is due today." Peteck quickly refocused on sensing if other beings might be somewhere in the building, but luckily, this Human's was the only living EM field he felt. "Can I speak to him please?"

"He's— he's up with a group doing some atmo diving. He won't be back for a while."

"Oh, my. This does present a problem. I told him before that I'd hold off on the audit as long as I could because he had some other schedule conflicts on the previous days, but this was my last available window. I actually need to get back to the office and submit my findings within the hour."

The Human's anxiety increased. "You do? What'll happen if you can't get your audit thing done now without him?"

"Well, according to—" Peteck mused benignly while he casually hit a few buttons on his datapad and pretended to skim the nonexistent information, "—Part 32 of the Public Safety Regulations Code, Section 195, Paragraph 4.6, a commercial establishment that engages in hazardous activities with the public— that's AtmoXtreme, like the atmo diving you just mentioned your boss was doing with customers right now— requires a current, passing audit from our office in order to remain in operation. In a couple of hours, the last audit will expire and no longer be current, so... if I go by the regs, we'll have to suspend the business license. No more customers until everything is cleared and legal again, starting tomorrow."

The Human's anxiety spiked. "Tomorrow? But we're booked solid for tomorrow!"

Peteck sighed. "Sorry. That's really too bad. You might need to start making some comms and cancelling. My office will be in touch. Thank you for your time." He turned to walk out.

"Wait!" The sound of the chair scraping back and the Human jumping to her feet were quite satisfying. Peteck paused. The Human hurried around the desk and stood before Peteck. The wiry Human was nearly eye-level with the short Gotal, and her curly hair made her seem a few centimeters taller. "Please, sir, is there a way I can help you with your audit thing now

instead of Mr. Ritlan?”

That was exactly what he'd been hoping to hear. Peteck absently tapped his datapad as though he was thinking hard and considering it. “Possibly,” he allowed at last. “If you can, I would actually prefer it. I don't like closing places and causing conflict— I'm just making sure the public stays safe. Actually, all I need to do is check the certification stickers on a few randomly selected items with pressurization cylinders installed, like breathing tanks or jetpacks. Could you show me where those are kept?”

The Human's face broke out in a grin, and relief flooded through the air. “Yes, I can! Come with me, please, sir.” The Human scampered toward the back, waving Peteck with her eagerly. The glow of satisfaction inside Peteck grew warmer, and he followed the Human at a more dignified pace.

“What did you say your name was?” Peteck asked while they walked down a corridor. “I'm Berit.”

“Nice to meet you, Berit. Have you been an employee here long?”

“A little while. I'm working here while I finish up school,” the Human said. “They let me schedule things around my classes, which helps a lot. Got one this evening after work, actually.” She stopped outside of a door, keyed in an access code on the control panel beside it, which Peteck surreptitiously watched, just in case, and opened the door when it unlocked. Berit turned on the lights and led Peteck inside.

Sure enough, small tanks of breathing air and even a few containing other gaseous commodities for non-oxygen-respiring species lined the shelves along the walls. Peteck fought the subconscious nervousness that usually triggered an increased shedding of his fur until he finally spotted what he needed on a smaller storage rack near the center of the room: jetpacks.

Relaxing in relief, Peteck nodded, pocketed his datapad, and then went about playing his role. He walked the shelves of breathing tanks and stopped by several random ones to check the inspection and certification stickers on them. All of them were in good shape and valid. “These all look fine,” he said in approval. Berit grinned.

Peteck walked to the group of jetpacks. A quick glance at the most accessible one showed him where the small certification sticker was. Peteck reached out and grasped the jetpack to maneuver it around for a better view of the sticker, just like he'd been doing with the air tanks. This time, though, he casually made sure his left thumb grabbed the jetpack in exactly the right place: over the top of the certification date on the sticker. When he let go, Peteck was pleased to feel the forged date sticker come off the thin band and instead adhere to the jetpack, covering up the real date.

He bent down to study the jetpack's certification sticker, and he paused, frowned, and peered more closely at it. He detected the nervous shift in Berit's aura.

“What? What is it?” Berit asked.

Peteck pointed at the date. “This one is expired.”

“What? No, that can't be right!” Berit said. She hurried forward to see for herself, and once she had, despair and fear rolled off of her. “No, I don't understand. They should all be good!”

Peteck considered that information while he set that jetpack aside and checked the stickers on the others. They were, indeed, fine. Peteck looked back at Berit and put on a scrutinizing expression. “You say they should all be good, but that one isn't.”

“I don't know how that could've happened!” The despair felt a little more personal than Peteck expected, and if he was right, it would make this even easier.

He took a chance. “Is it your job to keep the certifications up to date?” Peteck asked gently.

Berit nodded miserably.

That made him feel guilty, but he had to keep pressing forward. Peteck looked back and forth between Berit and the jetpack and acted like he was considering things again. “I’ll tell you what. Maybe we can fix this.”

A spark of desperate hope flared from Berit. “We can? How?”

“Well, I probably shouldn’t do this, but you’ve been really helpful with letting me in here to get this audit done. All of the other certifications are good, it’s just this one troublemaker. It probably got accidentally missed, nothing malicious, I expect. Let me take this one back to our lab. We’ll run some tests on it– nondestructive, I promise– and if it tests fine and wouldn’t endanger a member of the public who’s using it, I’ll renew the certification and bring it back here tomorrow good as new. Then you’ll be in full compliance.”

“Really? You would do that? But– wait–” The whirlwind of emotions shifted to despair again. “Tomorrow would be too late for your audit thing if you need that today.”

Peteck shrugged. “Since the rest of the audit went so well, I can grant an interim continuance for AtmoXtreme to remain in full operation while we test this one outlier.” He patted the jetpack and attempted a smile again. “As soon as this one tests fine, which I’m sure it will, the audit will be passed and I’ll bring this back for you with a new, good sticker. Mr. Ritlan wouldn’t even have to know about it.”

Those seemed to be the magic words. Berit brightened again, and relief replaced the hopelessness. “Thank you so much, sir. I really owe you one if you would do this for me. You’ll be saving my job.”

“Nonsense, you’re a good employee. I’m sure Mr. Ritlan knows that,” he reassured her. Peteck picked up the jetpack and followed Berit out. Berit secured the storage room and joined Peteck in the lobby.

“Need me to sign anything for this?” Peteck asked. “Just so your boss doesn’t think it’s been stolen if he notices it missing before tomorrow?”

“Oh. Um, yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” Berit scrounged through the clutter on the desk. Peteck casually watched as she did so, and he saw notes with some scheduled times for tomorrow when customers would be here and he could come back with a minimum of fuss. He also saw the datapad Berit had been reading looked like a fluids engineering textbook.

Finally Berit pulled out the datapad she wanted. She scanned the jetpack’s ID chip, and its individual property information and serial number populated the form. Amid the numerous fields being automatically filled out, Peteck noticed one of them was the actual, unexpired certification date. If Berit spotted that, this whole plan was in trouble. Peteck quickly took the proffered stylus and signed it with a completely illegible scribble, closed the form, then thrust the stylus back at her. Now it was time to go before things unraveled.

“Thanks for all of your help, Berit. I’ll be back tomorrow,” Peteck promised. “I’ve got to get going now and take this to the lab before I start on my audit report. I hope your class goes well tonight.”

“Thank you, sir!” Berit called after him as Peteck walked through the front door with his prize in his arms.

Thankfully the squad had dutifully stayed in the speeder, and they watched as he opened the aft cargo compartment, secured the jetpack and his business jacket inside, and went to the driver’s seat. When he climbed in, they were exchanging credits amongst each other, some

happier about it than the others.

Peteck jerked a thumb back toward the cargo compartment. “There’s your jetpack. I need it back tomorrow. Undamaged.” He put the speeder in gear and headed out.

“I knew you could do it, Peteck,” Taures said. There was a grin audible in her voice, and pride and triumph emanated from her.

“I kind of wish you hadn’t. That means I’ll actually have to go through with the jetpack portion of this mission plan,” Slevi told Peteck. “I hate using those things.”

“I’ll trade you.” The deadpan voice belonged to Essem. It was one of the few times he’d spoken since they’d left Peteck’s place. Peteck again appreciated Essem’s quieter energy field and more controlled emotions. It was hard being around sentients who didn’t realize they were constantly yelling at his sensory cones.

“Where are we going now?” Rez asked. Case in point: her energy and attention were intense while her emotions flitted between curiosity and something deeper, like a sense of duty or responsibility and what felt like an undercurrent of chronic fear.

Taures leaned forward in her seat. Her mischief swirled into play, and the close-quarters, discordant mixture from everyone started to give Peteck a headache. It had been too long since he’d been in sustained contact with a group, and his defensive tricks had grown rusty and forgotten. Taures spoke up. “Well, remember when Peteck said earlier that the AtmoXtreme business was going to do pod-racing? That gave me a great idea for how we could fit a pod-racer into the plan—”

“No.” The unanimous sentiment was voiced by everyone.

Since Taures insisted on “helping,” Peteck finally agreed to let her do exactly that. It was in a small capacity, but Peteck could use the extra assistance on this one.

On the other side of town was a demolition company. They specialized in smaller projects like residential building tear-down and speeder scavenging, mostly because the local Imperials kept a tight leash on them, or so Peteck had heard. Anything larger or potentially more destructive had to be worked directly through the Imperials. The company’s demolitions inventory was strictly regulated by the Imperials as well, both in terms of what they were allowed to use and how much they were permitted to store at a time.

They had many items Peteck would love to get his hands on to provide back to the Alliance, and he’d scouted out the establishment quite thoroughly in the past. But despite that desire and his preparations, he’d always resisted the temptation to follow through with acquiring anything. One misstep that caused any part of his distinctive Gotal features to be visible on their security footage would lead them straight to him. Plus, since he wasn’t entirely sure of how closely the Imperials monitored the company, what items the company would have to report as missing, and what the potential consequences for them might be, it was attention he didn’t want to draw unless he had to.

Today he felt he had to. They had one of the trickier items Taures needed, and other options were slim, especially with the time constraints.

Rez and Slevi had remained in the speeder parked a block away, under strict orders to not cause complications but to be ready for a fast pickup if needed. Taures was going in the front door to pretend to get some information on what it would cost to hire the company for scrapping a speeder she’d totaled in an accident. Peteck’s only instruction to her had been to distract the employee or employees as long as possible; like at AtmoXtreme, this place had few extra workers, and the current lack of company speeders in their parking lot meant most of them were

out on a job. Taures assured Peteck it wouldn't be a problem. He hadn't figured it would be.

That left Peteck and Essem, who had shapeshifted to a Human form. Peteck felt a pang of envy at Essem's on-demand anonymity. Peteck swapped out his business clothes for more utilitarian civvies.

Once Taures went inside, Peteck gave her a few seconds to start engaging the employees and draw their attention away from any security monitors. Then he quietly led Essem toward the back of the property.

The area around the small warehouse near the speeder scavenge yard in the back was quiet. Peteck concentrated, but didn't detect any electronic signatures of new external security cameras added since the last time he'd scouted this place. Staying low, Peteck and Essem took advantage of various containers and construction equipment to keep out of sight of most of the security cameras. At last they reached the warehouse, and Peteck hurried to the far side. There was an air intake vent near the ground, and the rusted fasteners on the grate cover still hadn't been repaired. It only took a short time to remove the vent cover and disconnect the ducting from the wall. Peteck squeezed through the hole in the wall with difficulty, and Essem followed more easily.

The interior of the warehouse was mostly dark with some sporadic safety lights, but that didn't bother Peteck; the information from his sensory cones was more than enough to navigate by. He went slowly enough to keep both him and Essem away from interior security cameras, but soon they came to what they needed: the company's stock of Flex-5 detonite tape, strictly regulated in the city. Peteck silently passed three rolls to Essem, which earned him an impressed feeling from the Clawdite, then walked a little farther on. They took a short detour to avoid another security camera and encountered their second, more common prize afterward in the form of liquid cable dispensers. Peteck grabbed a dispenser and pocketed a large handful of cable refills. They repeated that slow snatch-and-grab process with a fusion cutter on yet another shelf. Peteck itched to grab some of the other tantalizing items on the surrounding shelves, but he refrained. He was causing this company enough trouble as it was.

Cautiously, they headed back to the vent exit. It had taken longer than Peteck had anticipated to move around inside, and he wasn't sure if they'd run out of available distraction time from Taures. He prepared himself to run if any alarms went off, and as each second passed, he grew more certain it was coming. Essem could get away easily, but not him. He hoped Taures would be smart enough to get the squad far, far away from him when he was discovered and subsequently tracked down. Too many beings around knew the general answer to the simple question, "Where does the Gotal live?"

Somehow they got to the vent without klaxxons blaring. Peteck made Essem go through first, then he passed all of the items through to the Clawdite outside. Taking a breath and trying not to think about how little time—if any— they had left, Peteck squirmed through the tight vent access.

He was partway through when he accidentally got his cones lodged on something and stuck. He struggled and almost panicked as images flooded his mind of getting trapped in there and caught, but Essem reached in and freed them.

Finally Peteck was out, and he exhaled in relief. He couldn't detect anyone running their direction, so maybe they hadn't been noticed yet. He quickly reconnected the ducting and vent grating, scooped up the cable dispenser and fusion cutter while Essem carried the Flex-5, and led Essem quickly away behind the cover of a large piece of construction machinery.

They took a few moments to collect themselves there. Peteck calmed down a bit, but they

still had to get back to the speeder without any employees spotting a Gotal lurking about. If only he could shapeshift too...

While they regrouped, Peteck spotted something on the edges of his weak vision that made him perk up. He looked closer, into the company's speeder scrap and salvage yard, and confirmed what was there. His adrenaline-fueled happiness and appreciation for the stroke of luck washed blindly past Essem, unacknowledged.

"Can you carry all of this back to the speeder?" Peteck whispered.

"I think so," Essem whispered back.

"Do you remember the path we took coming in that gave us cover?"

"Yes. Why?"

Peteck handed the liquid cable dispenser and fusion cutter to Essem and helped him reconfigure things better in his loaded arms. "Take all of this back to the speeder right away. If someone from the demo company spots you, drop it all and run. I'll meet all of you at the speeder in a few minutes." Peteck tried to smile and jerked a thumb in the direction of the scrap area. "There's a swoop in there that looks pretty good. I'm going to see if I can get it to run."

Several hours later, Peteck had left three of the squad at his place with most of the acquired items so they could do whatever they needed to do to prepare it or stage it for their mission that night.

Slevi was hurriedly fixing the worst of the problem areas on the swoop using parts that Peteck had had to obtain from a local mechanics shop. The paint Taures needed for her mission had been liberated one liter at a time from several unattended residential garages. The stormtrooper armor had taken a while, and they didn't have every internal piece that made it truly functional, but the civilian-staffed armory that repaired and refurbished the local Imperials' armor probably wouldn't notice right away that one of the suits in a to-be-repaired container had been swapped with cheap foam look-alike pieces.

Now the sun had set, the stars and lights of passing ships were visible overhead through the patchy clouds, and it was just Peteck and Essem going after the last item, and one of the hardest: a B1 Battle Droid. Peteck had again tried to convince Taures to let him go alone, but her firm stance was that Essem could help with the droid.

In the neighboring city was a second-rate technical and engineering school. Like the rest of its surroundings, it was under-maintained and bleak, a place built more on promises than its history of fulfilling them. Many of the students who attended it did so in the hopes of learning enough to one day leave town and make a better life for themselves. In reality most of them never made it that far, and the school ended up spitting out mediocre technicians that the nearby Imperial garrison and various local Imperial government offices contracted at sub-par wages to maintain their vast amounts of equipment, like the armory repair.

The school was a useful and versatile resource for someone like Peteck, though, so he made sure to always keep a forged student profile with a fake name entered in their database. His student ID was nestled securely in his pocket in case things went wrong, but...

"I don't have any school documents for you or time to make them," he told Essem as they drove.

"That's all right," Essem said calmly. The Clawdite had long since reverted to his natural reptilian form and was still wearing his loose-fitting civilian clothes. "I'm not here to get in your way. I'm just along in case there's a problem with the droid."

The blasted droid. Peteck hated those things. "Good. Then stay put while I go in. I'll

comm you if I need anything.”

Essem nodded.

When they arrived on the campus, Peteck drove to the west end and parked in a secluded spot near the Automaton Studies building next to the Engineering Studies complex. Though it was dark out, the sidewalks and buildings had intermittent lighting. Evening classes were in session, and he hated doing this with so many students and teachers still around, but he couldn't afford to wait any later in case there wasn't a B1 here and he had to find one somewhere else. He double-checked the tools in his pockets, grabbed a datapad with the school's latest published information and refreshed his memory on a few of the current Automaton Studies teachers' names and projects, and then scoped out his target. About ten minutes later it looked like it was as clear as it was going to get, so he got out of the speeder and started off.

The other humanoids walking between buildings to their classes again made him feel out of place and cut off. He wanted to fit in for once and not stand out. Maybe then he could do his job without having to relocate so often. Some stability would be nice, as a change of pace.

That reminded him of the likelihood of having to move again once this mission was over, and a pang of regret fluttered deep inside. Soon he'd be in yet another new town, probably the only Gotal there yet again, and the cycle would start all over.

Maybe Taures and her squad had the right idea. Even when they moved, they stayed with each other: there was some consistency. But the issue of Peteck's inability to fly under the radar like they did obviously hadn't gone away in the last several hours, and it never would. He'd be a walking target drawing attention to them. Visible and obvious.

Just like he felt right now.

It was all giving him a headache.

He forced the feelings down and made himself focus on his job while he walked. The best way he could make himself less visible when he knew he stood out was to make it seem like he was supposed to be there. He quickly adopted the general posture and gait of a few other students he saw walking nearby, and without stopping he went to the storage building behind the main Automaton Studies classroom building.

As expected, the door to the storage building was locked, and the single flickering light above the door illuminated far too much for his tastes. Peteck dug into his pocket as if getting out a key, and as he did so he concentrated fully on the information his horns were sensing to detect anyone coming near.

He was immediately sorry that he had, since the first and strongest sensation was a jab of pain in his head from the large amount of power cells stored in the windowless building before him. He flinched and tried to block it out again, then cursed himself for not noticing the signs beforehand; he'd erroneously attributed the dull headache to the day he'd spent crammed next to Taures's squad and having to constantly guard himself against their electromagnetic intensity.

When he got this spike back down to a low throb, he pulled out his lockpicking set. He hadn't had a chance to sense if anyone else was around or approaching, and looking around to check visually would draw attention to himself as something Not Right, so he took a breath and quickly went to work as casually as he could.

Soon Peteck got the simplistic lock open. He pocketed his tools, opened the door, stepped inside, and turned on the overhead light. He closed the door behind him.

The concentrated interference and energy emissions from the bins of droid power cells was even stronger without a solid wall blocking it, and Peteck cringed at the sudden sharp pain and wave of dizziness. He'd forgotten how much he hated coming to this building. He forced his

eyes open and quickly looked around.

The building's interior was a single, large, cluttered room with shelves upon shelves of messy boxes of droid parts. Some shelves held droid appendages, others had circuit boards, still others had droid casings— some whole, some not. Other shelves had things Peteck didn't even recognize. They were all jumbled and thrown together with only the barest of categorical order. None of the parts were new; most had frayed wiring, corrosion, and a layer of dust for good measure.

Squinting through his growing migraine, Peteck moved as fast as he could through the room. He glanced over each shelving unit and started feeling a little desperate as he got farther in. There was a part here and there of what he thought might belong to a B1 Battle Droid, but that wouldn't do him any good. He'd thought there would be one here for reference or study or something, whatever it was that students and teachers did with droids. Where else on this blasted planet could he find one of these infernal things—?

He cut off his wondering when he spotted what he'd been hoping for, and he exhaled in relief. Peteck hurried to the corner where it sat in a heap, and he crouched down to study it. Underneath a few dented astromech domes and protocol droid torsos was what looked like a spindly B1 in its folded stowage position. The head had fallen off and was dangling from its neck by some wires. Some of its limbs were different colors, and one of those limbs was disconnected and lying beside it. Dust and cobwebs coated it, and a small faded piece of flimsi stuck to it mentioned something about "Melecki's student project." Peteck began moving aside the random chassis pieces covering it.

To his left straight down a shelving-unit corridor, the outside door to the storage building opened.

Startled, Peteck looked up. He was too accustomed to sensing other beings coming in advance, but that was drowned out by the blasted power cells now. He was directly in the newcomer's line of sight.

The being in the doorway seemed a bit confused at seeing the lights on and Peteck inside as well. "Oh. Hello?" the Duros said.

Peteck stood. He strained to sense what the Duros was feeling over the interference, but the effort made his headache worse. Surprise, maybe? Peteck could play off of that. "Hello," Peteck said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

The Duros walked inside and came closer. "I didn't expect to see anyone in here."

Peteck shrugged nonchalantly. "I just had to run in for something quick. I won't be long."

The Duros studied him, and his surprise shifted to puzzled curiosity. "I don't think I've seen you around before. I thought I knew everyone who had access to this building."

Peteck smoothly adjusted his tactics. Curiosity and analysis— especially from a Duros— required enough honesty to make the lies ring true as well. "You probably haven't seen me before. I'm a student, but not in this department. Working with droids would drive me absolutely crazy, you know?" Peteck tapped one of his sensory horns. "It hurts just being in here. I'm just doing a quick favor for a friend."

The Duros was turning skeptical. "What kind of favor?"

Peteck jerked his large thumb at the dusty heap of B1. "I know Melecki. Asked me to pop over and get this old abandoned project after I finished my classes today."

The Duros looked at the B1, then back at Peteck. The skepticism wavered briefly but didn't lessen. "That doesn't explain how you got in here," he said.

Peteck kept his voice casual— after all, he was supposed to be there and was doing

absolutely nothing wrong— and grabbed a teacher’s name at random from what he’d memorized on the datapad earlier. “I talked to Professor Guillec.”

Somehow he’d managed to pick a name that made the Duros downright suspicious. “You did?”

“Yeah.”

The Duros squinted his large red eyes at Peteck and reached into a pocket. “That doesn’t sound right. Let me ask her.”

He pulled out a comlink, and Peteck was just about to protest and say they shouldn’t waste Guillec’s time when something else made them both stop. Slow, heavy bootfalls sounded from the storage building’s doorway. They both looked over to see a Weequay coming inside.

This was getting way out of hand. Peteck was about to extricate himself from the situation completely when the Weequay looked directly at him and asked in a deep voice, “Did you find my old project?”

The words made Peteck pause just long enough to realize that the loose-fitting clothes and calm, controlled energy were familiar. He threw his mind into another gear and went with the new flow, like he ended up having to do more often than he cared to admit in his line of work. Peteck nodded and said, “It’s right here, Melecki. I’ll have it out in a minute.”

“Good. I’ll help. I promised the professor I’d bring her key back.” Essem walked forward, and the grumpy glare on his wrinkled face made the Duros move aside quickly.

The two Rebels went to work, and Peteck felt the Duros’s twinge of anxiety before he hurried out. Peteck and Essem stepped up their pace, unsure if the Duros would be returning with security.

Finally they had everything. Essem carried the folded droid with difficulty, and Peteck’s arms were full of the detached pieces and a few other parts Essem had pointed out and said they needed.

As they walked out of the building, Peteck went from feeling trapped to feeling vulnerable, and the lit sidewalks felt like spotlights. Despite that, he made Essem walk at a casual speed with him back toward the landspeeder. The pounding in his head thankfully decreased the farther away they got from the storage building. The couple power packs Essem held for the B1 were easily manageable.

Peteck focused hard while they walked, searching desperately for any indications that the Duros or alerted security officers were looking for the one Gotal on campus that night. He was so sick of feeling like that all the time, and especially now. Today’s concentrated events had rubbed him raw. Envy of Essem’s ability bubbled up again.

They were about halfway to the parking lot when he picked up on a vaguely familiar energy growing stronger. He paid closer attention, expecting to discover it was the Duros coming back with reinforcements, but he couldn’t feel any aggression in it.

Then Peteck spotted the source and almost wished it was the Duros. Berit was up ahead, walking toward them from the parking lot on the same sidewalk, with her backpack slung over a shoulder and a sense of intrigue emanating from her. Alarm flared within Peteck, and he struggled to keep his fur from shedding.

“You two need a hand with all that?” Berit called.

“No, thanks,” Peteck said, silently willing Essem to keep moving.

“You sure?” Berit smiled at Peteck as the distance closed between them. Her aura was friendly, but Peteck wished she’d just leave them alone. This was the exact situation he’d been afraid would happen, and his insides twisted as the danger loomed closer. “I don’t mind

helping,” Berit continued. “Heh, you know, I hardly ever see Gotals around, but today... First a Gotal does me a huge favor at work, then I see another one here. At first I thought you might have even been him. Silly, right? But... wait...” Peteck sensed the puzzled shift in Berit as they got close enough for her to begin actually recognizing him in the intermittent lighting and realizing the odds of seeing another short, blond-grey Gotal the same height as her in the same day were pretty low.

That line of thought had to stop right away, that instant, and the best way to do that was to surprise Berit and put her off-balance and on the defensive. “So you think all of my kind look the same? Is that it?” Peteck snapped. “Typical Human.” He didn’t make eye contact as he brushed huffily past Berit.

As Peteck had hoped, Berit stopped. Her aura abruptly shifted to include a pang of hurt. “Sorry,” Berit said. Peteck could tell she meant it, and he was glad she couldn’t see his cringe as he continued with Essem to the landspeeder. He truly hadn’t wanted to do that to Berit—the kid hadn’t deserved it, especially since Peteck knew she didn’t believe what Peteck had accused her of— but it was too close of a call. Getting recognized by someone after one scam while in the middle of a second would bring everything crashing down and endanger them all.

Luckily the pair of Rebels made it the rest of the way to the landspeeder without further incident. They loaded the droid and parts into the back and then climbed in themselves. Peteck put the speeder in gear and drove them out as fast as he could without drawing attention.

It wasn’t until they had driven completely off the school’s campus that Essem closed his eyes, grunted in discomfort, and changed back to his reptilian form. The physical transformation caused a jumble of electromagnetic information to hit Peteck’s sensory cones, and the chaotic sensation disoriented him for a few moments.

When Essem opened his eyes again, Peteck felt some annoyance bubble out from him. “*That’s* what you call ‘operational’?” Essem asked, indicating the pile of parts behind them.

“That’s what I call the only easily-obtainable-on-short-notice B1 droid on this continent,” Peteck grumbled.

“It doesn’t have its weapon either.”

“What did you expect? It was a school project. I’m sure you can get it armed and working like you need to.”

Skepticism greeted him.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to get in the way,” Peteck said.

“I don’t believe I did get in the way,” Essem replied.

“Then what do you call what you did?”

“Hearing that a teammate needed some assistance and helping him.”

Peteck felt a spark of something that felt like fitting in. He pushed it aside. “How did you know I supposedly needed help?”

Essem shrugged. “I was watching. When I saw the Duros go in the building, I snuck over, kept out of sight, and listened.”

“Thanks.” Peteck fell silent after the grudging word and mulled over the events on campus while he drove. Even if he didn’t want to admit it, Essem had helped. And the earlier procurement at the demo company wouldn’t have been possible without Taures and Essem. In fact, now that Peteck was thinking about it, there were a bunch of scams and cons that would be a lot easier to pull off with two beings instead of one, especially if the second being was trustworthy and could shapeshift. Or even if they couldn’t shapeshift. Could something like that be a possibility...?

No. The last encounter with Berit proved it. Peteck's distinctiveness, his uniqueness, was a huge problem and had almost gotten them caught. Another few seconds and Berit would have definitely recognized him. What if that happened during a mission with the squad? They would all be in danger. It was even conceivable that he'd caused problems for them now by being recognized.

The guilt and frustration at the situation and unequivocal proof that he'd have to relocate and start all over again, alone, got the better of him. "You're so lucky," he grumbled, softly enough that he wasn't sure if it was audible over the landspeeder's rumbling engine.

But it was, since Essem looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean?" Essem asked at a normal volume.

Peteck spoke normally now as well, but some bitterness seeped through. He doubted Essem could determine the full extent of it though. "You can look like a Weequay. Or a Human. You can look like something more common. You don't stick out like—like this." Peteck's large hand indicated himself. "That's what almost got us caught back there. That's what makes me have to keep relocating over and over. Things would be so much easier if I could just fit in somewhere. Blend in."

"What do you mean, what almost got us caught? You mean with the Duros?" Essem asked.

"No, the Human who wanted to help us carry everything."

"Her? I wondered what that was all about with your reaction. She seemed friendly enough. I didn't expect you to snap at her," Essem said.

"I had to. Of all the lousy luck, she's the one I scammed the jetpack from at AtmoXtreme."

"Oh. Okay, but she didn't seem mad, so what was the problem?"

"I couldn't let her know for sure it was me," Peteck insisted. "I had to get control of the situation back and make her stop thinking the two Gotal she saw today were the same one. It would have ruined everything. It's too blasted hard to not be recognized when you're as distinctive as I am."

Essem thought that over for a few moments, and sincere confusion emanated from him as he did so. Finally he said, "So what if she *had* recognized you? I don't see the problem. Even if you used a different persona earlier today, it's not a far stretch to believe that persona was taking classes there too. Nothing would have been ruined."

Peteck shook his head. Essem didn't get it. "But there would have been suspicion," Peteck explained. "There would have been questions. She would have wondered what was really going on. And you know what happens when the questions start? Beings ask them. Then they compare notes, and they quickly find out that there was a Gotal at the center of it all. Then the authorities are called in. Then the authorities talk to the Imperials. And because I stick out, it's super easy to find me. Then the Imperials get ahold of me, and what do you think happens then? To me and to any Rebel contacts that know me? *Pew pew*. Dead. So yeah, after today's activities it's obvious that this area is a bit too small. I'll move somewhere else and have a clean slate for a little while. I just... wish I didn't have to. I'm tired of it."

Essem considered that some more, and then said, "I don't think you have to if you don't want to. If you're not procuring things from the exact same people every single time, which I know you aren't, I'm sure it'll be fine to stay. Beings won't be suspicious of you if they happen to see you in passing doing something else. In fact, I bet this might even work to your advantage. They probably register their interactions with you as nothing more than an interaction with a

Gotal. Maybe a bit of a novelty. If that's what they remember about it, they probably don't remember any shadiness or double-talk you might have been up to during that interaction. Like the Human just now. She talked about her earlier experience today as a positive, a favor. Beings don't get suspicious when they're focused on things like that."

"It's just a matter of time until someone is," Peteck argued. "Then I'm stuck. The single Gotal in the area is easy pickings. That's why you're lucky: if I could change my appearance to something more common and not stand out anymore, I could do my job so much more easily. I'd never have to worry about suspicion following me again."

Peteck wasn't sure if Essem physically rolled his eyes, but based on the unexpectedly strong surge of emotion coming from him, he may as well have. "Right, because *no one* is suspicious of shapeshifters," Essem said, the sarcasm in his words matching his feelings.

"Sure, fine, but no one has to know you're a shapeshifter unless you want them to," Peteck said. "I don't have that option."

Essem brought his emotions and voice more under control before speaking. "Everyone on my ship knows. I stay in my natural form as much as I can."

The negativity still accompanying those words confused Peteck. "But no one on your ship would be suspicious of you. They know you," Peteck said.

"Wanna bet?" Essem challenged. "Very few beings outside of my squad understand me or know what my capabilities actually are. They don't know my abilities have massive limits, that I can't impersonate any of them individually, or that I can only shift into a couple of different forms. If I'm not being the brunt of jokes— 'Hey, Essem, we thought that portable light fixture was you! Ha ha ha,'— then I'm the scapegoat that gets every infraction pinned on him by beings who don't want to take responsibility for their own actions and claim it was me in disguise. I'm constantly having to prove my whereabouts on the ship. And that's not even including all the things I'm sure Taures shields me from that she doesn't tell me about. It doesn't matter that I can physically blend in with a crowd. What matters is if anyone else will let me. That's something you have that I don't. You can make people remember you— or not— in exactly the way you want them to." Essem looked sidelong at Peteck. "I've been watching you work all day. You may think you stick out, but you don't. You know exactly how to blend in. You're a better shapeshifter than I am."

Peteck didn't verbally reply. He only wished Essem could sense the sheer amount of disbelief and disagreement Peteck felt at those words.

But Essem wasn't a Gotal. So he didn't. He couldn't.

And Essem had no idea what it was like for someone to not be able to blend in. He was a Clawdite. So he didn't.

He couldn't.

It had been a long day, and Peteck was grumpy when they got back to his place. He helped Essem unload the B1 and all of its parts and carry them inside, and Essem immediately went to work on it. Slevi and Rez jumped in to assist.

Taures scrutinized Peteck and came up to him when he moved away from the others. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"Fine," he grumbled. "Just need to start making moving plans."

Taures furrowed her brow. "But I thought if we helped get the food and blaster packs for you that you wouldn't need to move."

"Yeah, well, I do. Had a problem on this last run because I was out too much today. And who knows if things will heat up with what I took from the demolition company." He found the

datacard that he unfortunately used too often, put it in a datapad, and sat down at his tiny kitchen table.

Something that felt like a mixture of guilt and regret simmered inside Taures. “Sorry. I never meant for that to happen.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Peteck replied, more gruffly than he intended. Sometimes he still had trouble modulating how much emotion to inject in his voice for non-Gotals. He turned on his datapad.

Taures glanced at it. “Well, I’ll leave you to your work.” She went to help her squad with the old Battle Droid.

Peteck pulled up a few files on his datapad, including the map of the planet and the steadily-growing list of cities and towns he’d already operated out of. He plotted them all on the map and started looking for the best areas he could move to that weren’t near a previous location.

His heart wasn’t really in the search this time, though. He was sick of this, and he was frustrated and angry. As a result, several times he let himself get distracted and watched the squad work from where he sat. He wanted to be angry at them for accelerating this move, but if he was honest with himself, he couldn’t be. Sooner or later, the move had been inevitable anyway, regardless of if they’d shown up or not. Like every other place he’d lived, it had only been a matter of time.

At one point, Slevi connected two wires on the droid, and the droid’s vocalizer sputtered and started up in a higher-pitched voice than Peteck was used to hearing from B1s.

“Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger.”

“Slevi, turn that off.”

“I’m trying.”

“Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger.”

“Slevi!”

“I’m trying!”

“Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger rogggggeerrrrrrr.”

The nonstop vocalizer finally died away in a distorted, drawn-out electronic moan. Slevi grumbled under his breath before saying, “This thing is a mess. I hope that Melecki guy got a failing grade.”

They went back to work.

Peteck sighed silently. No, he wasn’t really angry at them. Watching the squad, Peteck figured he was more envious than anything. Envious of the teamwork, the ease in each other’s company, the silent communications and understanding despite their lack of sensory cones.

An unproductive hour passed. Growling to himself, Peteck finally gave up on his search. He shut down the datapad without being anywhere close to a decision he knew he needed to make that night of where he’d be heading in the morning before anyone could discover the missing items and review security footage. He pocketed the datapad and got to his feet. “I’m going to bed,” he said. It was still a bit early, but it was a good excuse.

The squad looked up from where they were in various stages of droid repair. Taures was the one who spoke. “Oh.” Her face and energy fell, but she tried to brighten her expression again while she stood and came over to him. “All right. I know we’ve been running you ragged all day. I really can’t thank you enough for all of your help with this, Peteck. And we’re still getting your food and blaster packs. I’ve revised the mission plan to make sure we get them for you.”

He again didn’t acknowledge the promise. “Well, just don’t get killed tonight, okay? Any

of you,” he said instead. “Lock up when you leave. Be careful.”

“Eh, we’re always careful. We don’t have much more to do before we head out, and we’ll be quiet so you can get some sleep,” Taures said. “Thanks again for your help. Take care of yourself.” She smiled at him, and Peteck mimicked the gesture awkwardly. Then Taures returned to her squad, and Peteck went to his small bedroom and closed the door behind him.

Peteck sighed and looked around the cramped room. He had to start packing, but switching rooms hadn’t changed his inability to handle the reality of having to move again. The galaxy was so blasted unfair.

He struggled between his need to start packing and the total lack of motivation to do it. If he went to bed, it would be conceding defeat and admitting he wouldn’t be packing that night, but he had to do it, no matter how much he didn’t want to.

Finally he sat down in the ratty recliner beside his bed. It was a little too small for him, and he’d found the recliner in a less-than-savory place when he’d first moved here, but the condition of his furnishings never mattered to him since he’d be leaving them behind before too long. Sitting there was a stall tactic and he knew it, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t going to bed yet, but he wasn’t packing yet either.

Peteck didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep in the recliner until he was woken up by loud banging on his front door.

He jerked awake in a panic. The light in his bedroom was still on, and a passing glance at his chrono showed it was late, well past midnight.

The loud pounding came again. Peteck scrambled to his feet, desperately trying to sense how many authorities were here and if they had the place surrounded or if he could escape out the back.

It confused him to feel only one being’s blunt, intense energy at the door, like a terrified bantha trying to get inside. “Peteck! Open up!” Rez shouted. She banged harder on the door.

That confused him even more. Peteck hurried through his small, darkened house and opened the door. Rez rushed inside and wildly whirled to face him as he closed the door again.

“Taures and Slevi got caught on the mission,” Rez said, her words tripping over each other in haste while fear and a crushing sense of failure washed after them with all the subtlety of a tidal wave. “We need your help!”

At first all Peteck could do was stare. Then his mind rammed into overdrive. “What happened? Are they okay?” he demanded.

Agitated, Rez began pacing. “We don’t know,” she said. Her words and energy were still going a million clicks a minute. “We finished our original objectives, the plan was going haywire like usual, and Slevi was going after the crates of food when he reported he ran into some trouble. Taures went to help. A few minutes later she transmitted our codeword that means ‘things are going more wrong than usual, retreat.’ We waited for them at our rendezvous point, but neither one showed. They’re not responding to comms. Essem stayed there to watch for anything happening. He told me to take the sloop and check our contingency meeting places, and if the others weren’t there, to come and get you. I knew the fastest way here.”

Peteck absorbed that for a moment with a sinking, guilty feeling in his gut, and then asked, “How can I possibly help? What do you expect me to do against an Imperial garrison? I’m not a soldier.”

“Essem said to come get you. Said you could help,” Rez repeated. “So let’s go. Oh, wait.” She finally stopped pacing and pulled a blaster pistol from her belt, then offered it to

Peteck grip-first. “Essem said to give this to you since you might need it over there.”

Peteck looked at the blaster with distaste. “I don’t like blasters.”

“So what? You might need it. Take it.”

“Rez, have you ever felt someone die? I mean, really *felt* what they were experiencing? And have you ever felt someone die from a blaster wound?” Peteck shuddered. He had no desire to go through that again. Stun bolts weren’t as bad but were still disconcerting and hurt his sensory cones.

For a few seconds Rez looked at him like he’d just tried to explain an astrophysics equation to her in Shyriiwook. Then, “Essem said to give this to you,” she insisted.

“Oh, for—” Peteck said in exasperation. He took the blaster from her. “Look, this thing is too small for me. My finger doesn’t even fit in the trigger guard. I have my own. Wait here.” He thrust the pistol back in her arms and went to his bedroom. He quickly changed into a dark set of utilitarian clothes, put on a dark jacket, and grabbed his blaster and holster from its secured location under his bed. He made sure it was set to stun before strapping it on. He had no idea what else he should take, so instead of wasting time thinking about it, he returned to where Rez was wearing a path in his living room floor.

She jerked her head up when he approached. “Good. Come on, swoop’s right out front.” She strode through the front door.

Peteck didn’t really want to get on that scavenged swoop, and he wasn’t sure there was room for him as a passenger on it either, but on the other hand he was concerned that if he didn’t go, Rez would fly it into his house and haul him away by his collar. He followed Rez outside and locked his door behind him.

Somehow he managed to squeeze onto the swoop behind Rez. She gunned it to life before he was completely situated, and they shot off into the night.

Peteck was impressed that Rez had managed to find a shortcut he hadn’t known about. He also found that it was better to focus on that instead of the constant terror caused by Rez’s reckless flight through town. Between the route and the speed, it wasn’t long at all before Rez hauled the swoop to an abrupt stop in an alleyway near the Imperial base. Essem climbed down from a narrow ledge he’d been on about three meters up on the wall forming part of the alley. He was in his natural form, and like Rez, he was wearing his mission gear. He clipped his macrobinoculars to a ring on his belt.

“No change,” Essem said quietly, skipping any greetings, “though I think half the base is awake and on alert now after— how did you put it— our little non-covert op.”

“Great,” Rez said with a grimace. “I told her that stupid B1 was overkill.”

Peteck was shaking slightly as he gratefully clambered off the swoop. Solid ground had never felt so wonderful under his feet. “Do you know if they’re still alive?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Essem said.

“So I’m guessing you don’t know where they are.”

Essem pulled a datapad from his pocket and turned it on. It displayed a map of the Imperial base, which was small by the Empire’s standards. “Here’s the last place where we knew they were,” he said, pointing to a particular building. “I don’t know if they’ve been moved.”

Peteck studied it, then he looked at Essem. “Look, I want to help, but like I told Rez, I’m not sure what you expect me to do. I’m not a soldier, I’m a scrounger who sticks out. I’m not going to be useful here. I’ll just draw more attention to you. I’m sure you two don’t want to get caught too.”

“He didn’t want the blaster either,” Rez piped up, as if it was relevant.

“Rez and I can handle the dirtier stuff,” Essem said. “But I’m not really sure how to approach this. Taures is the one who always comes up with the plans.”

“I don’t know anything about military strategy,” Peteck protested at the expectant implication.

Essem met Peteck’s eyes, and Peteck was surprised to feel confidence coming from the Clawdite along with bubbling fear Essem was trying hard to control. And the odd thing was that it wasn’t self-confidence... it was confidence in Peteck.

“Peteck,” Essem said calmly, “this isn’t about military strategy or being a soldier. You know exactly how to do this. The Imperials have a good squad leader and a somewhat annoying Twi’lek in there, status unknown, and we want them back. How would you get them?”

Peteck blinked. “I–” His mind shifted to another gear, then it ground back to the original. “I can’t go in there and con the Imperials!” he protested again. “One look at me and they’ll be suspicious, especially if they’re already on alert. The demo company probably already has my wanted poster up in the hallways there.”

“But not all your cons go in through the front door,” Essem replied, a quiet insistence that forced Peteck to listen. “And you have two helpers, some equipment we brought ourselves, and a few of the items you got for us earlier today. So how would you do this?”

Peteck blinked once more, then he looked back down at the map on Essem’s datapad. His mind tried to shift to its scrounging gear again, and this time he let it. He stared hard at the map while trying to remember everything he’d learned about the Imperial base since he’d been here, either from his own innocuous scoutings or from random tidbits he’d heard from other beings, sometimes when they didn’t realize he was listening.

Essem waited patiently. Rez started pacing.

A few minutes later, Peteck returned Essem’s gaze. “I have an idea.”

As ideas went, this one still needed some cooking before it could be considered half-baked. But if Taures and Slevi were still alive, they were in danger, and there wasn’t time to bake the idea any longer.

It was far from one of Taures’s brilliant plans. It wasn’t even a good plan. But for some reason Essem and Rez had both agreed to it.

Peteck hated it. And the thing he hated the most was that he’d been the one to come up with it. He had no one to blame but himself.

Given the amount of time that had elapsed since Taures’s retreat order, Peteck figured she and Slevi had probably been moved to a holding cell if they were still alive. It would have been easier to hit the speeder taking them there, but that opportunity was most likely long gone.

Rez gathered the leftover mission items that they needed, and Peteck jogged to a nearby store that was open all night to purchase an extra-capacity portable CO2 fire extinguisher. They met back in the alleyway where Essem had remained on lookout duty, watching the base for any changes.

They hashed out a few final details. When the idea, charitably defined as a plan, was as ready as it could be, Essem shifted to his Human form and put on the stormtrooper armor pieces. Rez secured the B1 Battle Droid to the side of the swoop with a detachable strap.

“*Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger.*”

“Shut *up*,” she hissed at it. “Essem, I hate this thing. I thought you fixed it.”

“It probably glitched out when it got hit by the Imperial earlier. I’m actually surprised it’s

functioning at all,” Essem replied.

“That’s about to change,” Rez growled over additional oblivious choruses of “Roger roger.” She pocketed the droid’s remote command-signaler.

Peteck put the fire extinguisher and the fusion cutter into a backpack and slung it on, and pocketed a small amount of the leftover Flex-5 tape. Essem had the rest of the leftover tape. Peteck wished he had some of his own equipment that was already geared for scams like this instead of having to improvise it on the fly.

“Everyone set?” he asked, struggling to keep his fur from shedding out in a whirlwind of hair.

The others nodded.

“Okay,” Peteck said. “Rez, when we need the distraction, we’ll signal you. I’m sure it won’t be long. Essem, let me know if you can’t get the speeder.”

“I’ll get it,” Essem replied calmly.

“This first part would be a lot easier with the jetpack,” Rez said.

Peteck agreed. It figured that the one item he felt duty-bound to return to its rightful owner was the one in Imperial custody with Slevi. And this definitely would have been easier with a jetpack, so much so that he’d considered going to AtmoXtreme and breaking into the storage room for one, but in the end he decided they didn’t have enough time.

He took a deep breath. Now or never. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

Leaving Rez behind, Peteck followed Essem down darkened streets and behind old buildings in town. They stuck to the shadows and stayed as quiet as they could while they moved. After going several blocks over and around, they came to a weak spot in the Imperial base’s perimeter fence where the Rebel squad had initially snuck in that night. It was well out of sight of the closest Imperial building inside. Essem squeezed through and then helped Peteck. He had to temporarily remove his backpack to struggle through the small gap.

The pair moved farther into the base, staying in the unlit areas, until they reached a road. Peteck pointed out a nearby tree alongside the road that he felt should work: it looked tall and sturdy enough, and there were no streetlights nearby. Essem gave Peteck a boost into the tree’s limbs, and Peteck scrambled up until he was hidden in the leaves a few meters up.

Essem turned and started to jog away down the road toward what they believed was the local Imperial motor pool. Peteck had given him some tips earlier on how fast to run and how to hold himself as if he was a stormtrooper suddenly called to duty in the middle of the night to respond to a threat, and he was pleased to see Essem following the suggestions. Soon the Clawdite was even out of range of Peteck’s sensory cones.

Peteck waited. He wondered if Rez was keeping it together, and which would happen first: if she would destroy the Battle Droid out of sheer frustration with it, or if she would be unable to continue waiting and would plow that swoop right through the Imperial guard gate early. His chest tightened at the thought. If she did that, it would ruin everything. Peteck wasn’t used to relying on others so heavily during a scam, and this one was more dangerous than most. He began planning out possible escape strategies for them.

Finally a speeder’s headlights approached on the sleepy road. Peteck tried to determine if it was Essem driving it, but other factors clued him in before his cones did. The speeder was a small freight landspeeder with a large box enclosure on the back for cargo, just like Peteck had wanted. It slowed as it approached his tree, and as it got even closer the headlights turned off. At last it maneuvered directly beneath the tree limbs overhanging the road and stopped. Peteck quickly confirmed that, yes, it was Essem he felt in there, and then he climbed on the branches

over the speeder's box enclosure. Peteck lightly dropped down onto the top of the box enclosure, but his backpack beside him, then laid flat on his stomach to minimize his profile. He clicked his comlink twice to signal to Essem that he was ready. The speeder started moving again and turned its headlights back on.

Essem drove to what they believed was the Imperial security building. It was quite active with Imperials coming and going even at this time of night. Peteck hoped that was a sign that their two wayward teammates might be inside. As they'd gotten closer, he definitely could see the increased activity all around the base since the Imperials had gone on alert like Essem had mentioned.

Essem drove around the small, one-story building to the back on its south side. There was a spot that would work perfectly: a small parking chute that backed directly up to a door, probably for taking prisoners to and from the building. Peteck hoped that Essem saw it.

He did, and he carefully backed the landspeeder into the spot as far as it would go. He powered down the speeder and stayed put. Peteck had thought it was too risky to have him moving around yet in case a real Imperial would hijack a random stormtrooper for another task.

This part was all up to Peteck.

He took a few seconds to try to detect any security cameras or Imperials nearby, but the cameras seemed to be just below the top of the tall freight landspeeder, probably pointing at the prisoner loading door. He took a deep breath, carefully stood up with his backpack, and climbed the short distance from the top of the speeder's box enclosure to the roof of the building.

Peteck stayed low as he walked across the roof. First he had to find Taures and Slevi, so he methodically moved from one side of the building to another, concentrating with all of his might to detect them through the building structure and whatever else was in the way.

Near the southwest corner of the building, Peteck stopped. That had felt like Taures's energy somewhere below him. He dropped down on his hands and knees and focused again. Yes, it was hard to sense, but it was definitely Taures. He thought he could make out Slevi close by her as well. If he hadn't been stuck in close quarters with them for most of the day, he never would have picked out their signatures with all the obstacles and other beings around. It also made sense that the holding cells would be close to the prisoner loading door.

Peteck pulled out his comlink. "Confirmed, southwest corner," he murmured softly into it. "Going to Phase 2. Rez, stand by." He pocketed it again and then surveyed what was around him on the roof.

His sensory cones easily picked up the nearest power lines and conduits, but they were inside the building, inaccessible to him. He also spotted a ventilation port nearby. He couldn't fit inside.

Cursing softly, he took his backpack off and set it down, then removed the grate from the ventilation port. Next he grabbed his comlink.

"Essem," he whispered, "the vent's too small for me, and I can't reach the power conduits from here. Are there any junction boxes or conduit access points you see from ground level?"

"Stand by," Essem replied. A few minutes later, he transmitted again. "All set. Flex-tape is in place, and the detonator is set to DetChan 2. I also put some on the personnel door here that we're next to if you want to go in that way instead. It's on DetChan 3."

"Good," Peteck said in approval. "That'll be easier, assuming the first detonation takes out most of the power. Essem, stand by for the front door. Rez, you're a go."

"Copy," was all Rez said, but even without his sensory cones being in range, Peteck

could tell she'd been about to burst.

Now... it was all about timing.

The distant whine of a swoop, a crash, and blaster fire heralded Rez's arrival. Peteck had hoped to see her progress from his vantage point on the roof, but the other buildings and occasional trees blocked most of his view. The swoop and blaster fire got much closer, and then Peteck picked up the faint sounds of, "*Roger roger. Roger roger. Roger roger.*" The swoop's whine decreased as it peeled away, but the chipper choruses of "*Roger roger*" got louder before they were drowned out with a new slew of blaster fire. Imperials just below Peteck on the ground around the security building were yelling orders at each other and returning fire.

When there was sufficient chaos below but not enough for the Imperials to overwhelm the Battle Droid quite yet, Peteck took the CO2 fire extinguisher and pointed the nozzle into the building's ventilation port. He sprayed the billowing white gas inside with one hand while the other thumbed on his comlink. "Essem, go!"

This was the part of the plan Peteck was most concerned would go wrong. It was possibly even more dangerous than Rez's distraction.

Because of the noise, Peteck couldn't hear how things were going for Essem. The jumble of strong emotions— both fear and anger— from all of the Imperials around also made it hard to pick Essem's quiet aura out from the din. If it was going like he hoped, then Essem should be stumbling into the front door of the security building in his Human form and stormtrooper armor while being wracked with coughs, and yelling at everyone inside that the Rebels had released dioxis gas into the building before pretending to collapse. Peteck kept the fire extinguisher spraying until it was empty. He'd done this trick before— saying the CO2 was the highly poisonous dioxis and counting on their similar appearance and other beings' self-preservation instincts to not wait around to learn differently— but it had been months ago in a much smaller civilian building without the quality of ventilation system that this building had. He wasn't sure if it would disperse properly into the building's rooms or even be visible enough if it did.

He focused on the mess of emotions underneath him. When there was a sudden sharp uptick in fear and a bit of panic, Peteck grabbed his remote detonator for the Flex-5 tape and sent the ignition command on Channel 2.

An explosion erupted at ground level on the outside of the building's eastern wall. A couple seconds later, the panic below him increased significantly.

Peteck threw his backpack on, grabbed the empty fire extinguisher, and ran back to the freight landspeeder. Before leaving the roof, he sent an ignition command on Channel 3. A smaller, more muffled explosion sounded below his feet, and the freight landspeeder rocked slightly from the shockwave. He quickly jumped down onto the top of the speeder's cargo enclosure and used the extinguisher to bludgeon the nearest security cameras off the wall around the door. Then Peteck clambered down to the ground, tossed the extinguisher into the driver's compartment, and ran to the building's prisoner loading door. Smoke and the smell of burnt metal and electronics greeted him from the doorframe. He squeezed into the gap between the back of the speeder and the door, leveraged himself against the speeder, and pushed hard on the door.

The door's locking mechanism had been severely damaged by the detonite tape, but the door was physically still mostly in its sliding tracks. Peteck had to pull and push with all of his strength to get the door moved aside enough for him to squeeze through.

The inside of the building was mostly dark, just like he'd hoped. A few flickering

emergency lights were visible here and there, hazy in the lingering CO2. It was also an eerie combination of quiet from all the background electronics that had gone down with the power shut off and of noise from the confused, evacuating Imperials at the front of the building.

Peteck covered his head and cones with his jacket and quickly strode in. He moved confidently through the darkness, following the direction Taures and Slevi seemed to be in. It was much easier to detect them now.

Two turns later, there was an open door that led into a dark room that still had a significant amount of electricity running inside it. Peteck walked in and saw the numerous holding cells. And there, inside two adjacent ones, were Taures and Slevi. The forcefields on their cell doors were still active; they must have been on an independent power line for exactly this reason.

The forcefields emitted a small amount of light, and in that hazy, CO2-tainted glow, Taures saw Peteck walk in. She beamed. "Ha! Pay up, laser-brain," she said to Slevi with a laugh.

"Be glad to," Slevi replied. He was smiling as well.

"I don't know how long we have before backup power kicks in or the Imps start sweeping the place," Peteck said. He looked around. The holding cell's control console was dead without power, so he couldn't use it to turn off the forcefields. He jogged over, crouched down right outside the active holding cells, and concentrated.

There. It was easy to find the active power lines feeding these cells. They were underneath the floor.

The fusion cutter might work, but they probably didn't have that amount of time. Peteck took half of his small piece of Flex-5 and stuck it on the floor over one of the power lines. He quickly programmed it, took several swift steps back behind the room's control console, and detonated it.

The explosion was almost meek, but it weakened that part of the floor enough for Peteck to be able to stomp on it a few times and make a small area give way. There was room for him to reach a large hand inside and stick his last bit of Flex-5 on the power line.

This explosion wasn't as meek, and it more than did its job. The forcefields flickered and died, which also plunged the room into near-complete darkness.

"Great," Taures said in relief as she scrambled out. "The cabinet behind the control console has our stuff. Do we have time to get it? I can barely see."

"Grab hold." Peteck put her hand on one of his backpack straps.

"Okay. And I've got Slevi," Taures said.

Peteck led them to the cabinet, briefly used the fusion cutter to get through the weak lock, and reached inside. He found two full backpacks and two blasters that he figured were theirs, and he handed them back. On the bottom of the cabinet he also found the jetpack. Peteck eagerly grabbed that as well.

He led them out as quickly as he could. On the way, he keyed his comlink. "Targets acquired. Heading back to the speeder now," he said quietly. Behind them, there were numerous Imperial voices growing closer, and it looked like their owners had glowrods.

The prisoner loading door finally came into view, and Peteck had to restrain himself from running for it. He squeezed through the gap and opened the speeder's box enclosure while Taures and Slevi came through as well. He jumped into the cargo enclosure and beckoned them to quickly follow him. They did.

He set down the jetpack, then closed the speeder's cargo door while sliding the backpack

off and putting his jacket back on properly, and he felt the speeder's engine rumble to life. Peteck pushed down the quick flare of panic and made himself sense who was in the driver's seat. Yes, it was Essem, not some random Imperial taking them for a joyride.

"We're ready in the back," Peteck transmitted with his comlink. "Essem, go. Rez, meet us at our rendezvous."

"Copy. Did the droid make it?" Rez asked.

"No," Essem replied.

"Good."

Taures grinned, took the comlink from Peteck, and teased into it, "Cut the chatter and get us out of here, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am." The landspeeder bolted forward.

In a matter of minutes they'd disembarked near the gap in the perimeter fence, grabbed all their items and the empty fire extinguisher, pointed the speeder down the road and propped the throttle in so it slowly rumbled away on its own, and were gone.

They hid out for several hours about five clicks away in an abandoned garage Rez had spotted during her familiarization of the town. Peteck was tense and had a headache from constantly trying so hard to detect anyone coming near. The tired squad was mostly silent. Slevi had a comlink cupped to his ear and was monitoring the local authorities' comm frequencies.

But things stayed quiet. No security forces were overrunning the town. No sirens wailed in the distance. No APBs were issued for a Gotal.

After the sun came up, Rez took the swoop to Peteck's place, got his landspeeder, and returned to pick up the others.

Peteck felt their relief on several different levels as they finally dragged themselves into his living room and collapsed on his third-hand couch. Of the squad, Taures was the only one who stayed on her feet. She followed as Peteck slowly went to the kitchen for some water.

"Thank you," she said. Peteck didn't need the information from his sensory cones to pick up on her sincere gratitude.

"You're welcome," Peteck replied. He offered her a glass of water as well, and she accepted.

After a few massive gulps, Taures lowered the glass and wiped her lips. "I want to hear more details of that crazy plan of yours and how you pulled it off. I might use some of that in the future." She smiled and then quietly continued, "You know, I knew Essem and Rez would try coming in for us. I wasn't entirely sure they'd be able to convince you to join in."

Peteck sighed and swirled the water around in his glass. "It's not that I haven't wanted to help. And I wasn't going to say no when you and Slevi were in trouble. I was just worried that my involvement would backfire on all of us. I'm afraid it still might."

Taures furrowed her brow, and Peteck felt her confusion. "What do you mean? We got out of there, and they didn't chase us down right away through town. They won't do anything now, so much later. Nothing is backfiring," she said.

"Just my being there put all of us in jeopardy."

The confusion didn't lessen. "How so?"

Peteck swished the water around some more. He was too tired to come up with deflections or excuses, so he told the truth. "All it would take is a glimpse of me on any of their security footage, and they'll be busting down this door. Look, Taures, like I said, it's not like I haven't wanted to help. Even your offers to join your squad are more tempting than I've let on,

for lots of reasons. But it wouldn't work. A big, distinguishable Gotal like me can't sneak around in bases like you four can. I'm dangerous to have around. That's why I keep saying no. And that's why I'm afraid I should have said no to coming along last night."

Taures cocked her head and squinted at him. Finally she let out a big sigh. "You poofy laser-brain. In the last few hours, have you taken a millisecond to consider the fact that sneaking into an Imperial base with my squad is *exactly what you just did?*"

Peteck waved her words away. "So what? One frame of footage will ruin it all."

"I doubt they have it, or they would have been here already or contacted the authorities. The big, distinguishable Gotal got in and out more stealthily than the Twi'lek and human did." Taures shook her head. "Peteck, listen, I know what you look like and what it means for missions. But I haven't tried to recruit you for your sneaking ability. I've wanted you to join us because you think outside the box and have abilities that none of the rest of us have. There are other things to do, other support roles that don't usually involve a face-to-face shootout with Imperials. You see?" The entreaty this time was honest.

Peteck mulled it over. The avenue of other non-infiltration roles held promise that he'd have to consider pretty seriously. But he still wasn't quite sure about the rest of it, that he had been as invisible inside the base as Taures claimed he was. Had he been? Had he truly pulled it off?

"Maybe," was all he grudgingly admitted.

She offered a smile. "Just think about it. And I'm sorry we didn't get your food and blaster packs like I promised."

Peteck dismissed the apology. After the eventful night, those were the last things on his mind, and he still felt guilty that Taures and Slevi had been caught because of that stuff. Because of him, really. "Don't worry about it."

"When I get back to the ship, I'll talk to the Procurement group and explain what happened. I'll make sure they know that I caused the delays with it, not you," Taures said.

"You don't need to do that," Peteck said.

"Yes, I do. I won't let you get negative fallout on this because of me. It isn't—"

"Taures," Peteck interrupted, quietly but firmly. "It's fine. Really. I—" He hesitated, unsure if he really wanted to go through with this since it went against so many of his ingrained beliefs. But blast, he was so tired of moving so much. This newfound possibility was too tempting to pass up without at least giving it a shot. He took a deep breath and made himself say the words. "I'd already gotten some work done on it before you came. I... think I might pick back up with that."

"But I thought you had to move and start over with it."

Peteck shrugged and looked around his small house. "Maybe not. I... might stay a little longer so I can finish that up." Though mainly he wanted to test the theory that Essem and now Taures had started percolating in his mind. Could he stay in the same spot after he'd been recognized? Could he make this work after a public, high-stakes day of multiple scams? Would others automatically put the pieces together, or was Essem right, and he fit in better than he'd realized? If that was true, it would also give him longevity and more options in possible future support roles for Taures, and it was best to find that out on his own without endangering the squad in the process. But all the same, he would be careful about this, so Peteck added, "It'll depend on what the security is like outside when I go return that jetpack."

Taures nodded. "All right. Essem will go with you then, just in case."

"I'll be fine. I can go alone."

“Essem will go with you,” Taures insisted. Peteck’s sensory cones alerted him to a flare of stubbornness coming from her and something else... a twinge of protectiveness.

Touched, Peteck relented. “Fine.” He rolled his eyes in mock exasperation and hoped he did it right so Taures would understand the teasing intent. She must have because she laughed, and Peteck felt no negative emotions from her.

“And before I forget, here.” Peteck took a piece of flimsi and a stylus, scribbled a frequency on it, and handed it to Taures.

“What’s this?” she asked, reading it.

“My permanent comm frequency. So you can find me in case I move again before the next time you show up.”

Peteck stifled a yawn borne more from sleeplessness than relaxation as he pulled into the parking lot of AtmoXtreme. Once again there were numerous landspeeders. The scheduled time for a customer group that he’d noticed on Berit’s desk had been accurate. Everything was set up to his benefit, but his gut still twisted a bit at the thought of going inside.

“I’ll only be a minute. You can stay here,” Peteck said to Essem, but Essem was already climbing out of the passenger door. He’d shifted to his Human form before they’d left Peteck’s place.

“I’ll carry the jetpack,” Essem said. He walked toward the aft.

Peteck shook his head to himself. He couldn’t even be upset, and he was secretly glad for the company... especially when that company wasn’t yelling at his sensory cones nonstop and was well-versed in protective techniques in case something happened.

The drive to AtmoXtreme from Peteck’s house late that morning had been strangely unnerving in its normalcy. Only a couple additional Imperial speeders were out, and the few that were didn’t chase down the obvious Gotal visible in the driver’s seat. The sporadic local authorities didn’t look twice at him. There weren’t heightened, strung-out emotions from the local authorities, and the Imperials were more tense but in a general, directionless sort of way. Aside from that, everything seemed exactly the same as before.

He hadn’t originally intended to, but at one point Peteck had needed to see if the ordinariness extended elsewhere too, and he made a long detour to the small demolition company. He didn’t stop, but what he saw at that building as he drove past was the same as the previous day as well. No swarms of Imperial speeders, no crime scene tape, nothing. At that point he’d relaxed a bit and had continued on to AtmoXtreme, which he thought might end up being the true test of his theory.

Peteck joined Essem at the speeder’s aft, got out his business jacket, and pulled it on while Essem hefted the jetpack into his arms. Peteck locked the speeder and double-checked to make sure he’d taken the forged sticker off of the jetpack. He took a deep breath and tried not to convey how on-edge he was while he led Essem inside. If this third look at him really made Berit realize she’d run into him at the school as well and the suspicious Gotals were one and the same, then what?

Then...

Maybe he’d have to take Essem’s previous suggestion and just say this persona was taking classes there too, as if the persona had built a life in the area. He tried hard to relax while he walked through the door.

Once again, the building felt mostly empty except for Berit, who was sitting at the front desk and reading a datapad like before. She looked up and smiled when she saw Peteck and the

jetpack, and Peteck felt a huge relief wash out from her.

“Hello,” Berit said, friendliness in her aura.

“Hello,” Peteck replied. He awkwardly returned her smile and gestured at the jetpack Essem was putting on the desk. “Everything checked out fine. Here’s your jetpack back. You’re all good to go.”

“Oh, thank you so much!” Berit exclaimed. She stood and came around the desk to inspect the certification sticker. She grinned when she saw it.

“I matched the expiration date to some of the others so you can keep it in that group’s inspection cycle. That way it shouldn’t get left out,” Peteck said. He felt an odd kinship toward that silly jetpack at that moment.

“That’s great. Thank you again,” Berit said. “You have no idea how much you helped us. And me.”

“Don’t mention it. Have a good day.” Peteck nodded at her and turned to walk out. This was it, he was getting out of there free and clear—

“Oh, can you wait a second, please, sir?”

Peteck’s relief whiplashed back to anxiety as he paused and turned again to see Berit scrounging through the desk for something. At last she found it and let out a small noise of triumph. She straightened up, and Peteck didn’t expect to feel her emotions shift from friendly exuberance to something that felt like embarrassment as she offered him the small card she held. The odd thing, though, was that it wasn’t embarrassment as if she was worried about his reaction or what he would think of the item. It was more like embarrassment about something personal, like something she’d done that she wasn’t proud of.

He convinced the worst of his anxiety that the card was harmless and not a trap to snare him in to hold for the authorities. Peteck took it. On the front was a simple, colorful design with the words “Thank you” printed on it. He opened it and was pleasantly surprised to see “Thank you very much” handwritten in Gotal.

“I hope I got that right,” Berit said. “It’s not supposed to say something mean or offensive or anything.” She blushed, and the embarrassment swirled inside her again.

Peteck felt even worse for snapping at her the previous evening but didn’t know how to dig himself out of that hole and fix it. He swallowed the feelings for the moment and offered his awkward smile again. “No, no, it’s exactly right.” He continued with several words of the Gotal language, and then explained, “That means ‘you’re welcome.’” That was true for the first part, but he didn’t translate the apology he’d also included. His own hot embarrassment drowned out what he felt from her.

Berit smiled again, a bit tentative but with some relief. “I’m glad. I looked it up last night after class.”

“I appreciate it.” And he did.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer. I’m sure you’re busy,” Berit said. “Someone has to watch out for the public’s safety around here, right?”

“I suppose so. Take care, Berit.”

“You too.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around town.” With that, Peteck gave a short wave, then turned with Essem and walked out the door.

They were almost to the speeder when Essem quietly said to him, “There. You see?”

He did.

He was glad he’d finally opened his eyes.

The End

Revision A

10-4-20