"Cargo Hauler"

by Katie Zajdel
thumper@coronasquadron.com
http://www.coronasquadron.com

Disclaimer: *Star Wars* is not mine.

"Cargo shuttle NX-7841, you're cleared for launch. Vector 45 from the landing pad, beacon frequency 27. Contact Imperial Departure on Channel 3 when you've reached orbit." High above Jedha City, the Star Destroyer *Dauntless* continued its vigil, its protection, and its control. A faceless, crisp-voiced ensign transmitted the instructions from his station aboard the capital ship down to the small vessel on the surface below.

Imperial shuttle pilot Bodhi Rook punched in the assigned frequencies and comm channels as he responded. "Copy, *Dauntless* Control. Cargo shuttle NX-7841 cleared for launch, Vector 45, beacon 27, Departure Channel 3." As Bodhi automatically readied the shuttle's final few systems, he idly wondered what kind of person that faceless ensign was. Did he appreciate a good drink when life got rough? Did he enjoy his job? Did he believe in his duty? Or did doubts start creeping in in the middle of the night for him too?

Bodhi shook his head hard, scolding himself for the momentary lapse, and threw his attention toward his shuttle's flight controls. It wouldn't do to be inefficient when he was holding up other traffic. With a practiced motion and a little bit more force of will than he used to need, he increased repulsorlift and engine power.

The cargo shuttle reluctantly rose from the Imperial-controlled landing pad in Jedha City and headed for orbit. Once he was above the nearest rooftops, Bodhi increased his engine power and unconsciously held his breath. His muscles tensed, his grip tightened, and his dark eyes darted all around, going from his sensors to the exterior view through his cockpit windows, trying in vain to look in all directions at once. At relatively low speed and low altitude without any room to maneuver or recover, this was the most vulnerable position for the cargo shuttles and was usually when they got targeted by the ground-based attacks. The attacks were becoming more frequent, more likely. If one was imminent, if he could glimpse the quick flash of the missiles or lasers firing then he just might be able to avoid being hit...

Seconds felt like hours, but he finally climbed out of the danger zone, unscathed. Bodhi exhaled and slumped slightly in relief, then he had to focus on guiding the cargo shuttle through rougher air than he expected as he ascended. The cold desert's atmosphere was turbulent today, bumping and jostling the shuttle as if the moon itself was fighting its departure.

It probably was. After all, every lift-off now seemed to take more energy, more effort, despite the same amount of cargo mass being carried. If gravity couldn't keep the shuttle grounded, then the air tried to break it apart and force it back down to the surface. The moon was using everything in its arsenal, including other inhabitants, to resist and fight.

"That's ridiculous," he mumbled to himself. "Overactive imagination. It's a silly notion and you know it."

But all the same, he couldn't get the thought out of his head.

The notion continued to weigh him down, teaming up with its more physical cousins in the atmosphere and gravity, and Bodhi guessed it would remain lodged there for quite some time

despite his attempts to dismiss it. It was one more item crammed into the cargo hold of his mind, a space that was getting more full of thoughts and worries, more disorganized, and harder to carry with every day that passed.

He couldn't dwell on it now, though, not when he was supposed to be doing his job. And so he did his job, taking another load of kyber crystals away from Jedha forever, leaving his homeworld all the poorer for it.

At least he'd gotten out without being shot at. Perrij was still in bacta after his shuttle got hit in the last attack, and Bodhi shuddered just thinking about it.

Finally the shuttle left the last futile, dragging grasps of the atmosphere behind and entered orbit. *Dauntless* was quickly receding behind him, but it was refusing to grow smaller with distance. Bodhi switched his comm to the assigned channel and transmitted, "Imperial Departure, cargo shuttle NX-7841. I just entered Jedha orbit, bound for Eadu."

The reply was nearly instantaneous, the model of Imperial efficiency. "Cargo shuttle NX-7841, Imperial Departure. Copy you in orbit. Stand by one: you have traffic inbound that will be crossing your outbound vector. Maintain your current orbital trajectory."

"Confirmed, Departure, standing by." Bodhi punched his destination into the navicomp to calculate the hyperspace route, then there was nothing to do but wait for the calculations to finish and for his clearance to come.

Bodhi drummed his fingers restlessly on the flight stick. Usually this was his favorite time: calm, smooth flying with a breathtaking view of Jedha below, NaJedha beyond, and speckled stars above, forming the familiar constellations he'd learned as a boy. But not anymore. This quiet time had gotten *too* quiet, and without a pressing activity to focus on it was too easy for his mind to wander to new, unwelcome thoughts. He drummed his fingers a little harder, a little faster.

Because if he was really honest with himself, those unwelcome thoughts weren't new. Not entirely, anyway. But they had always lived deep down in the shadows where it was easy to ignore them and justify them away.

...Until Galen Erso had handed Bodhi a light that began to illuminate them.

"Cargo shuttle NX-7841, Imperial Departure. Inbound traffic is no longer a factor. You're cleared for departure to Eadu."

Bodhi immediately grasped at his job, his distraction. "Copy that, copy." The words tripped over themselves in their haste to leave his lips. "Cargo shuttle NX-7841 cleared for departure to Eadu."

With fortuitous timing, the navicomp beeped to signal its completion of the shuttle's hyperspace route calculations. Bodhi smoothly throttled up the engines and turned onto his assigned heading. Once he was past the system's mass shadow, he pulled the hyperdrive lever and shot off toward his delivery destination.

He wondered what was in store for him there today. He liked the man, but he was never quite sure anymore whether he hoped he would run into Galen on any given delivery run or not.

"No, careful, wait, no, no, careful–!"

Bodhi cut off his words, sucked in a breath, and pulled up short on the landing platform, clenching and opening his fists as he tried to release a spike of anxiety. One of the droids had just unloaded the last container of kyber crystals from his cargo shuttle and a clueless tech pulling a refueling line had nearly run right into the droid. True, visibility here on Eadu wasn't the greatest as the world was constantly soaked with night and rain, but until the cargo was inside the

research facility it was Bodhi's responsibility, and the bureaucracy involving damages was a nightmare.

After a second deep breath, Bodhi resumed striding forward through the downpour toward the tech. "Here, I'll take the line. I'll refuel it."

The tech looked dubious as he wiped the dripping water from his eyes. Unlike Bodhi and most other people who came to Eadu frequently, he wasn't wearing goggles to shield his eyes from the constant rain, which was probably why he hadn't seen the droid and probably also meant he was new to the outpost. He didn't look familiar either. "I'm not sure you're cleared for that," the tech said at last.

Bodhi fought down a flare of impatience. "Look, it's my ship, my shuttle. I know you all don't like me wandering around inside, but I come to this landing pad enough. I fly here enough." He recognized that he was starting to ramble, so he tried to press through to his point. "I've refueled here by myself before. I'll do it now." He held his hand out expectantly for the refueling line, water streaming in rivulets off his poncho as he waited.

"Well... all right. Just cut off the flow and put everything back right when you're done." The tech reluctantly handed him the line and moved off to his next task, futilely wiping more rain away from his eyes.

Bodhi wrestled the unwieldy line into position, attached the fixture firmly to the shuttle's intake valve, and started the refueling process. Usually he was all too happy to stay dry in his cockpit and let the techs handle this task, but he'd had enough of sitting in his cockpit for one day. He needed to do something simple, straightforward, and familiar.

While the shuttle drank the fuel, Bodhi caught himself looking around for Galen, but he didn't spot the scientist. That wasn't surprising, though; Galen didn't come out on the landing platforms too often.

Once the shuttle was fueled and the equipment returned to its proper place, Bodhi climbed back in the ship. He pulled off his dripping poncho and draped it near one of the internal air vents to dry it off faster. Even with that protection from the elements, his long dark hair was plastered to his head in wet strings, and his boots squeaked with every step. Even his thin goatee felt waterlogged. He raised his battered goggles back to their usual spot on his forehead where he would promptly forget about them until the next time they were needed. Parts of his uniform, namely the lower sleeves and pants legs, were soaked, so he quickly changed into a dry one. No cargo pilot on the Eadu run ever started his day without a spare dry uniform. Or, at least, he never did it twice.

With that done, Bodhi walked back to the cockpit, and his eyes reflexively scanned the landing platform one last time, though Galen still hadn't appeared. Maybe that was for the best, though, as a display showed Bodhi that new urgent orders had come in for him.

He read them quickly, powered up the shuttle, and patched his comm into Eadu Control. "Eadu Control, this is cargo shuttle NX-7841, requesting immediate departure. New orders came in, priority."

"Cargo shuttle NX-7841, Eadu Control. Departure clearance granted."

"Copy Control, cleared for departure." Small outposts like this were always so much easier to deal with in their comm protocol and airspace control, and Bodhi appreciated the simplicity then. He coaxed the ship into the rain-drenched air once more and set a new course for a rendezvous with a Star Destroyer several parsecs away.

It wasn't until he was in hyperspace again that Bodhi felt tension he hadn't even realized was there leave his shoulders, making them sag in relief at not having encountered Galen. Even

as the tension drained away, though, a ball of nagging anxiety filled his stomach instead, chiding him for his avoidance. He was running away again, trying not to confront more shadows that Galen was so adept at helping him illuminate in his life through their conversations about the Empire. It was hard to truly face the fact that through his actions he'd been complicit in numerous Imperial activities he could only describe as horrible. Shame ate at his gut. He was a coward for not wanting to deal with more of those discussions and the internal questions they brought up that pricked at his conscience. This weak, cowardly person wasn't who he wanted to be, but in all fairness, he was usually too confused to know who he really was anymore to begin with.

Mumbling admonishments to himself but feeling no better as a result, Bodhi refocused on the cockpit displays and the one thing he had control over in his life right now: his cargo shuttle. It obeyed his directions willingly, and he guided it to his destination. He put the latest load of kyber crystals behind him in his engine exhaust, along with the hard truths and harder questions spoken by Galen's soft voice.

He had to stop this mental spiraling. He was getting himself all wound up over nothing. He was an Imperial cargo pilot. This was his job. His duty. He was far from the only one doing it, too. He had never been one to stand out and make a fuss.

Besides, so what if he was uncomfortable with some things he'd seen and experienced while with the Empire? No one was ever completely happy with their job. It was an unrealistic expectation, and he was overreacting. His discomfort with the thoughts Galen had nudged him toward was his own problem to solve and learn to live with. What was he supposed to do, throw away his entire career over some discomfort? *That* would be completely crazy and a disproportionate response, and Bodhi was not a crazy man.

...Was he?

No, he wasn't.

That was why he hadn't taken Galen up on his offer that one day to simply ask what was being developed on Eadu. Something concealed among the shadows deep in his gut told Bodhi that the thing on Eadu was bad, and only crazy people opened themselves up to willingly knowing about bad things beyond their control.

Bodhi gripped the flight stick more tightly. Everything seemed beyond his control lately. Most of the disturbing things in his rapidly-filling mental cargo hold seemed to have been tossed in there by other people, though he was the one who had to haul it all around. More and more he felt like a spectator to his own life instead of a participant. Gambling hadn't filled that void or given him the control he wanted. If anything, it had just made it worse. With a bit of desperation, he wondered if there was another vice he could take up that would work better and not get him grounded with his pilot status revoked. He was running out of coping mechanisms and available mental cargo space.

Bodhi hadn't come up with any ideas before he reverted to realspace at his rendezvous point. The Victory-class Star Destroyer *Inexorable* hung there before him in the blackness, and the flight controller quickly shooed him into the landing bay with instructions to keep his engines hot.

Inside, his shuttle's loading ramp had barely touched the deck before a group of Imperial technicians was hauling crates into the shuttle's cargo bay. Bodhi stepped out of the cockpit and intercepted a quartermaster who was directing the loading activities even as he moved toward Bodhi. The quartermaster didn't seem to notice when he stepped into small puddles of Eadu rain on the deck plates that hadn't dried yet.

"You're a lifesaver," the quartermaster said before Bodhi could say a word. "Glad you were in the area. The garrison on Colot Six is desperate for these, so as soon as you're loaded, you'll have clearance to leave." He handed Bodhi a datapad with a manifest.

Bodhi quickly scrolled through it, but like usual, details on the exact contents of the supplies were lacking. "Right, right. Understood," Bodhi said. "I'll get it there as fast as I can." The emotional turmoil inside eased a bit as he realized he was going to help his allies. He was needed. He was making a difference. He was helping to make the galaxy better and safer.

Take *that*, pestering guilt shadows.

His job was fine. His duty was fine. His conscience was fine. *He* was fine.

The quartermaster flashed a quick smile. "Good to hear." With that, he gave his full, harried attention to the loading of the crates. In no time at all, everything was secured and the personnel had vacated, leaving Bodhi alone in his cargo shuttle once more.

He hopped back to the cockpit and threw his headset on, requesting launch clearance even as the boarding ramp was closing and the shuttle's spaceworthiness checks were being completed. As the quartermaster had said, *Inexorable*'s flight controller gave him immediate clearance, and soon Bodhi was on his way to Colot Six.

He'd never been there before, so he pulled up some information from the navigation database and read it out loud to himself as he scanned it. "Colot Six... colony world... small population... manufacturing facilities... large moon around a gas giant... no record of any Imperial garrison there. Must be new..."

He familiarized himself with the available data and finally sat back with a slight air of contentment as the engines blazed at full throttle and hyperspace swirled blue all around. The garrison needed him, and he wouldn't let them down.

His job, his life, was still a good one. Despite what his conscience tried to tell him.

At the landing coordinates he'd been given, the surface of Colot Six was a smoldering, gouged wasteland of widespread destruction. Bodhi's stomach felt hollow as he flew over the ruined landscape toward the Imperial garrison's temporary landing area. What could possibly have happened to cause this?

As he got closer, the town's small buildings came into view, with thin wisps of black smoke still rising from some of them. The skyline looked odd, though, and Bodhi squinted at it. At last he pieced together why it looked strange, and he sat back in his seat as the realization hit. The town's buildings weren't small... or at least, they hadn't started out that way. They had been considerably taller but were now mostly toppled. That unnatural jaggedness where they'd been blasted and demolished was what made the skyline seem so wrong.

Bodhi gently turned the shuttle and descended toward the landing area amid the Imperial pre-fab buildings. Buildings that were... built on top of the charred ground and undamaged themselves. Anxiety niggled in the pit of his stomach, but he pushed it down. These temporary buildings had to be a quick replacement for the Imperial facilities damaged or destroyed in whatever fighting had happened here. The troops and personnel had to recreate shelter immediately for their own sake after the fighting. That's why it looked like the buildings had been plopped down in the aftermath, not endured the brunt. Just replacements for the previous buildings damaged in whatever uprising had happened here.

...The previous buildings for a garrison that hadn't even been listed in recent system data.

Bodhi shoved down the second– larger– spike of anxiety. The data had to be old. It was either old data and the garrison's previous buildings were destroyed, or the Imperials were

helping the colony after whatever internal battle had already decimated the place.

That had to be it. They'd stepped in to help stop some sort of civil war and restore order.

On his final approach to the landing area, Bodhi noticed a high fence enclosing some space in a field a short distance away. The fenced area was maybe the size of a shockball court. Armed stormtroopers patrolled the outer perimeter and the closed gate. The main thing inside the fenced area seemed to be...

People?

It sure looked like a large group of people, some broken off into smaller clusters, some sitting by themselves. None were very active.

That was all he saw before he had to concentrate on the last few meters of his landing. He settled the shuttle gently to the charred ground while the repulsors kicked ash into the air. Once the shuttle was powered down, Bodhi lowered the landing ramp, grabbed the datapad with the manifest, and walked out of the cockpit.

An Imperial army captain was striding forward, leading a small team of grunts from the nearest pre-fab building. Bodhi stood at the top of the landing ramp but off to the side to give the army personnel room to board and start unloading the cargo containers.

"I understood this was a priority. I got here as quickly as I could," Bodhi said to the captain while holding out the datapad.

The captain took the datapad and began scanning the manifest as he motioned his team up the ramp ahead of him. "Yes, you made good time," he said, typing in his acceptance and receipt of the cargo before handing the datapad back to Bodhi. The pilot felt a flutter of pride inside. "Getting these so quickly will definitely make our security teams' job much easier, and having a bit more order and safety around here will let us get these people processed and moved off-world that much faster."

The captain dismissed Bodhi by turning toward his personnel where they were unstrapping the cargo containers, and he called to them, "The large containers should be the stun batons. Get those to the armory right away. Corporal Rost, take your container and hand out its batons to the stormtroopers currently on guard duty. The smaller containers should be the shock collars. Admin's waiting for those. Move!"

Bodhi's eyes widened as the pride inside him wilted. He stepped closer to the captain so he could lower his voice a little and still be heard over the soldiers' hurried activity. "Wait, wait, excuse me," Bodhi said. "I thought this was high-priority cargo."

"It is," the captain said while still monitoring the offloading.

"But–" Bodhi sputtered a bit, not even sure how to put his confused and increasingly worrying thoughts into words. "But I thought it was food or medicine or repair parts or something. Why are shock collars high priority? What does that even mean? What happened here anyway?"

The captain offered Bodhi a disdainful glance from the corner of his eye before speaking in a matching tone. "They're a high priority because we can't keep tying up resources to guard these prisoners from the town. We need to get them secured and moved off-world to the labor camps or wherever else we're told to send them. Then we can finally focus on pacifying the rest of the town by finding and eliminating the last holdouts who are set on attacking us."

"Labor camps?" Those were the only two appalled words Bodhi could get out. Why were people from a manufacturing town on a colony world being sent to labor camps? This twisting feeling inside wasn't some normal, minor discomfort about his job. His last illusions about the Empire began crashing down in slow motion.

The captain's voice was hard. "You have a problem with that, *pilot?*"

Yes, actually, he did. But his racing thoughts kept tripping over themselves, and all Bodhi could stutter out was, "I... don't see why labor camps would be necessary here..."

The captain turned at last, and his glaring eyes bored into Bodhi's. "Would you prefer we just killed them all? Shoot them dead in the streets for the carrion eaters?"

Bodhi shrank back. "No, no! Of course not!"

"Then perhaps you shouldn't be too judgmental about our methods," the captain sneered. "Now then, you have clearance to leave. I suggest you use it immediately before the ISB *somehow* hears about your 'concerns.'" With that, the captain spun on his heel and followed his last subordinate out of the now-empty cargo shuttle.

Bodhi's insides grew cold, and he slapped blindly at the mechanism to close the landing ramp the instant both of the captain's feet were on the moon's charred surface. Moments later the ramp closed, sealing the outside world away from him. His mind, heart, and breathing were all racing each other as he stumbled back to the cockpit.

He flew through his pre-flight routine and powered up the cargo shuttle, though he hesitated before engaging the repulsorlifts. Was he piecing things together right? Did he have enough information to know what was actually going on, or was he jumping to conclusions? Were those people under guard in the fenced area actually going to be fitted with shock collars and then shipped off to labor camps? And... had *he* made that possible?

He'd been so certain he was helping on this cargo run. He'd convinced himself of it. Had felt good about it. But now... it all looked like one more horrible thing he was complicit in. One more atrocity he had helped bring about. One more repressed shadow illuminated.

This wasn't what he wanted. He had never wanted to hurt people. He wanted to *help* them. And he desperately, desperately wanted to help those people here, who were about to be sent off into conditions possibly worse than death.

But all the wanting in the galaxy didn't change the fact that he didn't know what to do or how to help them. He didn't know how to make this right. Bodhi wasn't a soldier. He couldn't run out there and free everyone and protect them as they fled. He also wasn't an Intel agent with a sneaky, sharp mind who could plan and scheme his way past the guards. He was just a cargo pilot. All he did was deliver things.

It killed him to do so, but at last he engaged the repulsors and lifted slowly off the surface, ash swirling all around the shuttle and obscuring his view. His mind was screaming at him as he did so, horrified he was just leaving, but he internally screamed back at it, demanding it tell him exactly what to do about the situation because he had no ideas. He felt sick, no matter how much he tried to convince himself that he was wrong, this was a misunderstanding, and all of those people were either criminals and should be imprisoned or were all going to be okay.

When his shuttle was high enough for him to see over the cloud of ash and the fence of the detainment area again, Bodhi didn't want to look but his eyes instantly went there anyway of their own volition. Beside the fence, one of the army soldiers had a cargo container that had been on Bodhi's shuttle mere minutes ago and was passing out stun batons to a few stormtroopers gathering around. Inside the fence, it was a little too far away to make out much detail, but in the small clusters of people Bodhi could make out various humanoid sizes. Some were bulkier. Some were slimmer. Some moved jerkily, like they were injured. And some were small and lithe, like children.

Bodhi immediately squeezed his eyes shut and flew the next few dozen meters up by feel alone. By the time he had to open them again for safety's sake, the fenced detention area was

barely discernible from the rest of the destroyed landscape.

His cargo shuttle was empty as he flew it away from Colot Six, but his mental cargo hold had just been stuffed to the brim.

A couple days later, Bodhi distractedly tuned out the low din of conversations from the other diners as he waited his turn in a food serving line. His poncho dripped leftover rain onto the super-absorbency mats that carpeted the high-traffic areas of the small mess hall in Eadu's research facility. He was always so blasted cold in there with the circulated air blowing on the damp areas of his skin and clothing. It was nothing like the dry cold back home on Jedha. Jedha's was a more honest cold, one that hid nothing and didn't pretend to be anything it wasn't. Inside Eadu's facilities, however, the wet turned into cold which turned into clamminess which turned back into cold depending on where one looked or how one moved, making it impossible to anticipate or plan for. He shivered and huddled in on himself.

Someone casually stepped into line behind him. "You look cold," the soft voice said.

Bodhi was barely able to stop himself in time from whipping around; instead, he turned more slowly to face Galen Erso. The scientist's light, wispy hair framed his angular features, and he had some stubble on his chin, which Bodhi usually suspected meant he was facing a deadline. He wore his usual dark uniform with bluish-grey across the shoulders, a couple of code cylinders, and the science team's insignia on his sleeve. Galen's presence was both welcome and dreaded, because now... now Bodhi would have to follow through with the decision he'd made after Colot Six. That decision scared him, though, and he wasn't sure he'd be brave enough to do it. Maybe he'd run away again and prove beyond all doubt that he was really nothing but a coward.

"It's always cold in here," Bodhi said, though the conversational tone they used around others for show was strained. "I'm always cold when I'm soaking wet. Wish they'd put some heaters in here or something at least. Not like it's not going to stop raining outside for any length of time. They know it's going to keep happening."

Galen studied him closely in concern, and Bodhi could only imagine how sunken his eyes looked after barely getting any sleep the last couple nights. "Some heaters would be nice around here," Galen agreed. "Aside from the cold, are you doing all right?"

Bodhi shrugged half-heartedly and paused the conversation as his turn came to get food. He selected a packaged, boring-looking sandwich with barely anything poking out from between the two thin pieces of hard bread, then he moved aside and waited as Galen got a pressed sandwich for himself. He looked sideways at Bodhi. "A hot sandwich might warm you up a bit," Galen said.

Bodhi shrugged again. It probably would, but he didn't have much of an appetite at the moment.

When Galen had his food in hand, Bodhi asked, "Can we talk?"

"Certainly." Galen smiled a tired but genuine smile at him and beckoned him toward an empty table. "What would you like to talk about?"

"I–" Bodhi wavered, gathered his fragmented courage, and chose his words carefully with so many others in earshot. "I... want to ask."

Galen's stride hitched, then after the briefest of hesitations he changed direction and waved Bodhi along. Instead of going to the empty dining table, they left the mess hall completely. Galen led Bodhi to an exterior door, grabbed a rain coat from the many hanging on hooks beside it, donned it, and walked out into the gloom and rain. Bodhi pulled his own

poncho's hood up, lowered his goggles, shoved his wrapped sandwich in a pocket, and followed.

Bodhi was used to going outside with Galen to talk about more sensitive topics, but this time Galen led him to a new place among the hillside's craggy rocks, one that was farther away and more secluded than any they'd used before. Finally they settled themselves under a small, natural overhang, with the rocky outcroppings all around shielding them from prying eyes, listening ears, and most of the wind and rain. Bodhi was able to raise his goggles to see Galen better.

Galen's sandwich was doubtlessly cool and soggy by now, but it was seemingly forgotten as he turned to Bodhi and gave him his full attention. "What did you want to ask?" Galen asked in a measured voice, though it had been obvious since the mess hall that he'd known exactly what Bodhi's question was going to be.

Bodhi took a shaky breath and fidgeted despite knowing the scientist would ask that. It was one of the things he liked about Galen. Galen never put words in his mouth, never lectured him, never assumed out loud that he knew what Bodhi thought, felt, or wanted. Sometimes that made it hard, especially when Bodhi didn't know what he himself thought, felt, or wanted either and just wanted someone to tell him. But Galen always tried to make sure Bodhi's decisions and conclusions were the pilot's own, even if Galen had helped him get there. Outside of his shuttle, it was one of the few times now that Bodhi felt like he had some control in his life.

The moment had come. It was now or never.

Bodhi braced himself and pushed forward, making the courage manifest even if he couldn't feel it. "Before... There was that time before, another time when we were talking." Bodhi knew he was already starting to ramble, but Galen let him get to his point in his own time, his own way. "Talking about droids and blind obedience. Remember? And you said if I wanted to know what everyone was building here on Eadu, I should just ask. But I didn't. For lots of reasons, but I didn't." He took another strangled breath, certain that he didn't want to hear this answer but knowing that he needed to. If hearing the answer meant that he could do something, anything, to help, then he had to know. Maybe if he'd known sooner what was happening on Colot Six, he could have helped. Maybe if he'd known sooner about all of those things the Empire had done, that he'd assisted them with, he could have changed something. Made it right. Stopped people from hurting. Maybe. "So, I'm asking... what are you building here?"

Emotions that Bodhi couldn't fully recognize in the damp dimness flashed rapidly across Galen's face. Relief, perhaps, and hope, and... was that fear? Galen took a deep breath of his own and began to slowly speak, a contrast to Bodhi's quickened words. "We've been conducting experiments on the kyber crystals brought from Jedha and other places. These experiments have allowed us to unlock the key to powering a massive superweapon. The Empire has built this superweapon."

When Galen paused, Bodhi wondered what he had missed. He creased his forehead in thought and asked, "But... wait, when you say 'superweapon,' what are we talking here? The Empire already has massive weapons. An ISD is a superweapon. And if you put more together? A fleet of ISDs can raze a planet." And there was no shortage of Imperial Star Destroyers throughout the galaxy. "So how is this different? How is it worse than what we already have?"

Galen somberly met his gaze and held it. "We're not talking about razing a planet's surface. We're talking about the *complete destruction* of a planet. There will be nothing left of it. It's called the Death Star. It's a planet-killer."

Bodhi's irrational hope that maybe Galen had been exaggerating the build-up, that this new weapon might not be so much worse after all, dissolved instantly. His stomach entered free-

fall. "*What?*" Bodhi hissed. "Galen, are you telling me that this... 'Death Star' can *obliterate* an entire planet? By itself?"

"Yes," Galen said. "Instantaneously."

Numb, Bodhi leaned back limply against the rough rock formation. Scenarios flashed through his mind of all the ways the Empire could and *would* use a weapon like that. If this thing was already built, the galaxy's admittedly awful status quo was about to plunge into unrecognizable chaos and destruction very soon, the likes of which he'd never seen or even imagined. The future looked more bleak than Bodhi had ever thought possible, and he felt light-headed. He'd foolishly thought knowing about this mysterious project could help him prevent people from getting hurt, but he was one tiny raindrop in an Eadu storm. It was utterly laughable to think he could do a single thing to help anyone in the path of a planet-killer.

"I need your help to stop it."

Bodhi blinked, certain his buzzing mind must have blacked out from the revelation and he'd dreamed Galen's last earnest words. "What?" Bodhi said, struggling to focus.

"I need your help to stop it," Galen repeated.

The words were real. Somehow, in this situation, Galen had actually spoken them aloud. To *him.*

Bodhi burst out laughing in a sudden fit of hysteria. His voice came out an octave too high. "*Stop* it? You're telling me there's a *planet-killer* out there and you think I– of all people– can help *stop* it?"

"Yes, I do." Galen's calm, firm tone forced Bodhi's attention back to him, and the scientist waited until the worst of the pilot's hysteria had drained before lowering his voice and continuing. "There's a way to destroy it. I need you to take a message to an old colleague of mine on Jedha. They'll take things from there, but without this information there's nothing they can do. It's crucial that they get this message."

This was all so unreal. Bodhi stared, shivering from a gust of wind that tried to convince him he was actually awake and experiencing this. "And you can't just transmit this message?" he asked.

Galen shook his head. "Not with the comm blackouts here on Eadu. And there's too high a risk it would be intercepted. I need a messenger I trust."

A cold pit formed in his stomach, and Bodhi cast his eyes downward. His mental cargo hold full of failures and well-intentioned mistakes and complicit acts hung like an anchor around his conscience, a black hole sucking the light from all around it. "Then you need someone else," he said quietly. "Sorry. I'm not exactly the most worthy of trust." He gathered himself to leave but was stopped by Galen's sudden strong grip on his arm.

"Yes, you are," Galen said. "Because I've come to know you, Bodhi, and I know you *care*. Tell me, do you *want* to help?"

"Of course I do!" Bodhi jerked his head up as the hot words flew out. "But you can't honestly think just *caring* matters. I've cared my whole life, and still everything I touch here in the Empire becomes warped and ends up hurting others. That's what you've been helping me understand in all our previous talks, right? Yes, you've opened my eyes to the evils the Empire commits that I was trying to ignore and hide from before, especially my own part in them. But you know what? Knowing about it hasn't helped. Now I wish I'd realized that before I asked about this mystery thing, but I thought maybe... maybe it might. Somehow. But it hasn't. Knowing all this hasn't helped. It– it hasn't given me a *way* to help. All it's done is show me how awful my life is and how there's nothing I can do to change it."

"But I'm telling you there *is* a way," Galen replied, not backing down. He released Bodhi's arm. "Whether you like it or not, you're already involved in this. The cargo you hauled from Jedha helped develop and fuel the weapon. None of that was your intention, but it puts the onus on people like you and me, the ones who helped bring this monstrosity into existence, to take action to do something to fix it and protect the galaxy from it."

There was not a single molecule of free space left in Bodhi's mental cargo hold now, and he acutely felt the corresponding overpressurization. He wished there was room to pace and expend some of his nervous energy under Galen's intense scrutiny, but the rocks penned them in. He shifted his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet and crossed his arms, huddling in on himself again. "Listen to what you're saying," Bodhi said, his desperate voice almost a plea, though he wasn't sure why. "You think people like us, who didn't have the moral fortitude to prevent this from happening in the first place, can stand against it when we know how futile it is and how inadequate and worthless our best efforts have already been in the past?"

Galen shook his head. "You're fixating on the wrong lessons. Those talks we had were never meant to make your life seem worthless: they were meant to make you see how much your life touches everything around you and how *worthwhile* it is as a result. Bad things have happened, yes, but *good* things can happen too, and they spread through the galaxy in the same way. Whether it's good or bad that spreads depends on what we do and what we send out. You can send out good and alleviate some of the bad from the past. That's how a person can redeem himself. Understanding and knowing what has happened to others as a result of the actions you've taken is the first, key step on that path to redemption. The next step is wanting to change things and help make things right. You're on that path, Bodhi. You just told me you've taken those steps. Why are you resisting the next one, the one of actually helping?"

Bodhi paused, trying to gather his ricocheting thoughts and scattered, hypersensitive emotions. "Because..." He trailed off. This wasn't Colot Six. This was a planet-killer. This whole insane thing was too big. Too overwhelming. "Because I'm not sure I can."

"But I'm sure." Galen met Bodhi's eyes again, but Bodhi looked away and scuffed at the wet rocks with his boot.

"I used to think you were the smart one of the two of us," Bodhi muttered.

Galen chuckled, then he fell silent. The rain and wind whistling through the rocks were the only sounds as he waited for Bodhi's answer.

The pilot took several deep breaths. He'd wanted to help. He'd wanted to redeem himself and make up for his mistakes and failings. And here Galen was offering exactly what he wanted on a silver platter. So why did it terrify him so much?

"You... said you want me to deliver an important message," Bodhi said at last. Galen nodded. "What's the catch?"

Galen's small smile turned a bit sad. "Well, the people you need to deliver it to are rebels. They're good people with good hearts, fighting against the horrors you and I know too well. But they'll be difficult to find. If you were an Intel officer, I'd say you'd be able to investigate their location while continuing to do your regular duties and not draw attention to yourself, but you are not a subtle man, Bodhi Rook. I fear that once you get to Jedha, finding them and making contact will probably be a hard, full-time effort, meaning you'll have to abandon your other scheduled activities and duties. This message is too important, and the longer it takes to get into the right people's hands, the more likely it becomes that a world will pay the ultimate price. Do you think you could fake being sick or take enough unscheduled leave to give yourself a way to look for them and leave yourself a career to go back to after?"

"How– how am I supposed to go back?" Bodhi was baffled at the notion. "I've already been steadily hating every hour I spend in this uniform, doing things I don't want to do. Now I know they have a planet-killer and you think I can just go back to my cargo runs like nothing is wrong? Like nothing is happening?" Bodhi shook his head. "I can't. I can't do that. I'll deliver your message, but I can't be an Imperial anymore."

"Are you sure? Deserting or defecting isn't something you can come back from if you change your mind later," Galen warned.

"I think I've mentioned to you before that I'm not exactly a good gambler," Bodhi said, attempting a weak smile. "I tend to get in too deep and throw good money after bad. I've never been good at knowing when something's a losing bet and I should walk away. Even I can tell that this is one of those situations, though. Not just the planet-killer, but probably the whole Empire as well. It's just... been a very hard lesson to finally actually see that." He sighed. "So yeah. I'm not an Intel schemer, like you said, but I am a cargo pilot. I deliver things. I can deliver a message."

Galen held out his hand, and Bodhi grasped it in his own. The handshake was firm, strong, and warm in the cold rain. "The Rebellion will be lucky to have you. Thank you," Galen said softly. He looked like the weight of the galaxy had just lifted from his shoulders.

Bodhi tried not to think about the implications of that and where it meant the galaxy's weight would come to rest instead, so he distracted himself by asking, "So what is this message? Who do I give it to?"

"When's your next scheduled cargo run here?" Galen said.

"If I stick to everything like normal, then it would be tomorrow. I'm supposed to land here around 1400 hours," Bodhi replied.

"Good. Keep to your regular duties until then. I'll find you when you get here and give it to you. I can record everything tonight and gather what details I have to help you find the group." When Bodhi nodded, Galen pointed back toward the research facility. "And with that, we'd best be getting back before people start wondering. I have meetings soon, and I imagine you have more deliveries to make."

The next day at 1432 hours, Galen surreptitiously pressed a data stick into Bodhi's hand while the wind and rain whipped around them and the thick clouds hid any hint of the sun. "That's the message," Galen told him in a low voice. "I need to you to give it to Saw Gerrera. I believe he and his group are operating somewhere near Jedha City."

"Saw Gerrera. Got it. I understand," Bodhi told him, closing his fingers firmly around the data stick.

Galen smiled, that same odd mixture of emotions on his face: relief, hope, fear. He squeezed Bodhi's shoulder above the Imperial emblem on his flight suit's sleeve. "Thank you. Just remember, your life has worth. You can get right by yourself. You can *make* it right by being brave and listening to what's in your heart. You can help make it right for me as well. You're doing something to help, and I'm proud of you."

"I'm..." Bodhi fidgeted, then started over. "I'm not sure when I'll see you again. I don't know how I'll be able to tell you if I got the message through or not. If I'm defecting, I can't exactly come back here and chat."

"You don't have to tell me. I trust that you'll get the message through," Galen said. "But maybe someday when this is all over, we can find each other and I'll buy you a drink."

Bodhi couldn't help but laugh, half from amusement, half from nerves. "Better make it a

strong one."

Laughter touched Galen's expression as well. "I will. Good luck, and be safe, Bodhi."

"You too, you too. Thank you, Galen."

With that, Bodhi offered a nervous smile, then he turned and walked carefully back to his cargo shuttle while gripping the data stick tightly. Once inside, he pulled off his poncho, raised his goggles, and headed to the cockpit. He could change into a dry uniform while in hyperspace. Now that things were in motion, keeping the message here was dangerous, and every moment that passed was another moment that kept the galaxy in peril.

He powered up the shuttle, received clearance to leave, and lifted off from the drenched Eadu landing platform for the final time. The wind and rain buffeted the shuttle as it rose, then at last he was above the weather, then above the atmosphere, then in orbit.

While he waited for the navicomp to calculate the hyperspace route to Jedha on what would likely be his last flight in the cargo shuttle he knew so well, Bodhi was surprised at how calm he felt. Since the previous day when he'd made the decision to defect, he'd been a bundle of anxiety, fearfully envisioning everything that could go wrong when he finally did the unthinkable thing of throwing away his entire career, his entire life. What had he been thinking? After delivering the message, where would he go? What would he do? Could he sneak away somewhere? Maybe the Rebellion could find a place for him to live in exchange for his help now. But the uncertainties and anxieties had been paralyzing.

Now, though, now it was done, and the worries had unexpectedly quieted, even if only temporarily. He'd taken that step into the unknown, and there was no going back. His old life was over, and somehow he felt like he was stepping back into his *real* life, the one he enjoyed having, the one he *lived* instead of being an unwilling bystander to. This felt right.

The one thing he did feel bad about, though, was abandoning the friends he had in the Empire. They'd never believe what he was doing. What would they think about him? He wanted to warn them, tell Perrij and Misurno and the others about the planet-killer and the danger they were all in. He would help them like Galen had helped him. Hopefully he would get a chance to, but not until after Galen's message was delivered.

The stars twinkled above Eadu, and Bodhi let out a long exhale.

The navicomp beeped, signaling its readiness. In no time at all he was on his new, correct heading. Bodhi smiled, relishing the feeling of returning to himself by going home and helping to make things right. For the first time in a long while, he felt like there was hope for himself and his future. He would be all right.

He throttled up the engines and jumped to hyperspace, en route to Jedha and Saw Gerrera with only a data stick secured in a pocket.

Both cargo holds were finally empty.

*****

The End

Revision A
9-12-22