

“Up in Flames”

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Timeframe: 4 BBY to ?

Genre: Drama, some Action

Summary: After his parents’ deaths on the Gus Treta station, Wedge Antilles tries to find a new direction in life.

Notes: This is my entry for the 2013 Diary Challenge on TheForce.net Jedi Council Forums, where the objective is to write the diary of a character for an entire calendar year (out-of-universe). This story is based on information from the comics “The Phantom Affair” and the X-wing Rogue Squadron Handbook. It does not include anything from “Lucky” as I prefer the RS Handbook’s version of events. *Star Wars* is owned by Lucasfilm and Disney, not me (obviously).

### *Entry 1*

I don’t know where I’m supposed to start.

I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do.

I mean, how can I do anything when all I can see when I close my eyes is the fire? When all I can hear is the static from the comm and—

I can’t even write it. Not yet.

Damn it.

I hate what Mom and Dad did! How could they do that when they knew what would happen?! All I want to do is scream over Gus Treta’s intercom how everyone alive there had better appreciate the fact that they *are* alive because of my parents, and my parents are *gone forever* because of it! Because of those pirates! Because CorSec didn’t catch them in time! And Booster and Polipe wouldn’t even let me do anything to help! I could have helped. I could have done *something!*

I really wish Myra was around right now to talk to, and hopefully I’ll see her soon before I can’t take this by myself anymore and just explode. Booster’s here, but he’s not exactly the shoulder-to-cry-on type. And Syal, I really wish she was here too, but I still don’t know where she is. And— how am I supposed to find her to tell her our parents are gone? How? That’s something she needs to know. But how do I do that when I don’t know how to contact her? Maybe Booster knows a way. I’ll have to ask him. But until I see Myra, Polipe suggested I write things out to feel better. Don’t see how that’s possible at this point, but at least it gave me an excuse to hide away in my quarters on *Skate* for a while.

Everything’s gone.

This has been the absolute worst day of my entire life.

I just want Dad and Mom back.

## Entry 2

I did it.

Yesterday.

And since it's the middle of the night and I can't sleep because my mind is just too wound up, I'll go ahead and write about it. That should settle my brain down.

It's kind of been a blur, but was just a few days ago when those pirates were refueling at our fueling depot on the Gus Treta station, and they didn't unhook the fuel lines before they flew off fast. I've heard it was when CorSec showed up. Their engine thrust ignited the spilled fuel. Set the depot on fire. Dad and Mom died separating the depot from the rest of the station before the fire could spread.

I can't believe I actually just wrote that.

Initial security reports and Incident Reports— like what happened could blithely be called an “incident”— called it an accident. Like anything pirates ever did that took lives could be considered an “accident.” Even so, they were still responsible but had gotten away, not even caring what their “accident” had caused. Those same reports were pretty clear that the ship's name was *Buzzer*, a Series IV picket ship. She belonged to the Bonestar Pirates. As a distraction I spent hours going over the drawings and specs for Series IV pickets, hoping some day I'd get a chance to use the info. I had no idea it would be so soon.

It wasn't long after the memorial service for my parents on Gus Treta yesterday. Booster was the only reason I got through that. Everyone was all like, ‘Oh, they saved us all, they're heroes, we're alive because of them,’ but what they didn't seem to get was that they were my *parents*, and now they're *dead*, and what good is that lipservice going to do me from now on without them here? Yeah, all the beings on the station might be happy now, but eventually the feeling of gratitude and relief at being saved from a premature death will wear off. They'll go back to their daily routines and forget all about the reason they're still alive. But me, I'll remember it and have to live with it for the rest of my life. I still can't believe my parents sacrificed themselves for all these strangers and left me.

Anyway, that's not something I want to talk about now. Not long after the memorial service ended, Booster tracked me down again. His contacts came through where CorSec didn't. He'd found out that it wasn't an accident, and the ship's captain, Loka Hask, had ripped away from the fuel lines on purpose to blow up the station and stall CorSec from their pursuit. He'd also found out *Buzzer*'s approximate location.

I'm glad Booster didn't stop me, not that he could have. He even let me use his old Z-95. His Headhunter. Appropriate.

Booster and Polipe came with in *Pulsar Skate*, and we found *Buzzer* near Jumus like his contacts had said. I went after them. My first shot damaged the ship but didn't destroy it. I hope they knew then what was going to happen. I hope they felt as scared and helpless as I did watching Mom and Dad die. Booster wanted me to disable their engines and let the police come get them. I didn't agree with that approach.

I knew right where I wanted to hit: the main weapons magazine.

I fired. And I hit it.

*Buzzer* erupted into this huge fireball as it exploded. It brought back the image that was burned into my mind of the flames inside and outside of Mom and Dad's refueling station.

I watched the superheated gasses die out into nothing in the cold of space. All that was

left was chunks of debris.

Just like that, I got revenge on the pirates who murdered my parents.

It was so sudden. And I guess I didn't feel exactly like I thought I would. Some parts, sure. I was happy to wipe them out after what they did. But something else just felt... off. I don't know, empty. Like it was the end to my life as I'd known it. Like I didn't know where to go from there. Like I'd accomplished my goal and had no new one to take its place. And sure, now the pirates were gone, but that didn't bring back my parents. Not that I honestly expected it to, but... I don't know.

After I destroyed *Buzzer* Booster asked me how I was. It took me a minute to answer, but I told him I was all right. All I wanted to do then was go home.

So we did.

My mind's been in overdrive since we got back. It feels odd to realize that I actually killed people. That's something you can never come back from. I don't regret it, but I have to accept that I crossed that line and can't uncross it, and it puts things in such a different perspective than before. With that squeeze of the trigger I became someone different. Somehow things I would have considered intense before now don't mean anything. Everything's cloudier. Muted.

It's all very confusing. I don't know what it all means yet, but I guess I'll find out. The memorial service was only yesterday, but it all seems so far away now after everything that happened since.

And now I see this writing has backfired on me. I'd wanted to get it all out of my head so I could sleep, but now that I had to focus my thoughts enough to verbalize them, my brain is pouncing on that and trying to work through it all again now that it's not so nebulous and muddled and confused up there.

In the morning (or tonight if I can't get my brain to shut up soon) I'm going to trim off my ponytail. It doesn't seem to fit me anymore. It seems too... young.

### *Entry 3*

I saw Mirax today. We'd commed a few times since it all happened, but it was so much better talking to her in person. She felt bad that she couldn't get back here in time for the memorial service, but I know she tried to.

One of the first things she did after all the greetings and initial sympathy talk was done was ruffle my hair and tell me how different I looked with my new haircut. After that we grabbed some lunch and then roamed aimlessly around Gus Treta for a long time, talking.

It felt good to really talk to her about everything, even the parts I wasn't sure how to say. She even told me a bit about her mother's death. Myra was too young to really remember her mother before she died, but she told me how it still affects Booster on anniversaries. She also told me about some things she's secretly seen and heard Booster do on those days when he thought Myra wasn't around, but under threat of torture I'm forbidden to write them down in case Booster might ever find out. To protect against casual, accidental viewing of the subject matter I'm going to go ahead and encrypt this entry too, not that I expect that would so much as slow him down if he ever decides he wants to read this some day for some reason. Please don't kill me, Booster. I didn't breathe a word of it to anyone.

But really, what Myra told me helped. If even someone like Booster can still after all this time feel sad about losing someone but survive and be as strong as he is, then maybe this feeling won't kill me even though sometimes it sure feels like it will.

Eventually Myra asked me the million-credit question: what was I going to do now. I didn't know the answer. First she thought I would go dirtside to Coronet City and pursue my architecture full time. Something as far away from space stations and refueling depots and pirates and exploding weapons magazines as possible. When I told her that didn't feel quite right, she tried to talk me into staying on *Pulsar Skate* full time with her, Booster, and Polipe. That was closer, and something I'd actually been seriously considering already, but still not it.

We brainstormed a while—probably for a full lap around Gus Treta—and she even got a laugh out of me with some really off-the-wall suggestions. First time I've done that since it all happened. Eventually she nudged me in a direction that I think feels right: getting my own ship and hauling freight. I think a bit of roaming will suit me now.

We're going to talk to Booster about it tomorrow at breakfast. I've learned a lot from going on runs with him to know how a lot of it works already, but I don't know enough about things like finances and permits and insurance and stuff. And it's not like I've ever bought my own ship before either.

The whole notion is scary and exciting. And it's a wonderful distraction.

I'm going to go look at used freighter ads now.

#### *Entry 4*

Thankfully Booster's supportive of my new plan. He told me a lot of things to consider, and I went with him, Myra, and Polipe on his next run. Booster walked me through all the little details of each portion that I'd never paid attention to before. All the paperwork is going to be pretty dull, but maybe I can get a droid to do it for me instead.

When we got back to Gus Treta there was an official-looking transmission packet waiting for me. Turns out it was the initial insurance payouts for Mom, Dad, and our fueling depot. I hadn't expected them so soon— thought it'd be stuck in bureaucratic purgatory for a long time yet, but all the forms had expedite directives from the Gus Treta administrator's office plastered all over. Booster checked it over and said it looked to be in order.

I hated thinking of what the payment really represented. A bunch of numbers, a bunch of credits can never substitute or replace what I lost. It's impossible and insulting. When I told Myra, she spun it around in a way that I could handle better, that this was how Mom and Dad could ensure I'd be all right if something happened like it did. The credits weren't replacing my parents, it's really more like Mom and Dad giving me a gift or an interest-free loan from the afterlife. Thinking about it that way made it easier for me to look at that insurance payout as a down payment on a freighter. Didn't feel as guilty about it.

Booster had a little time before his next run, so he took me and Myra to a guy he knows who has a used ship yard kind of close by. Of course the really awesome ships were way out of my price range. There were a few cheaper clunkers that were okay, nothing special, but not what I wanted to live in and base my livelihood on.

Then I found one I liked. Not really sure why. She's a beaten-up little YT-700 with the registered name of *Solstice*. Needs quite a few repairs, but I can manage that, and the price was good because of it. She's small enough for me to handle on my own, both in terms of flying and of dealing with the cargo, especially while I'm getting started. There are lots of opportunities for upgrades and modifications. We took a short test flight, and I liked the way she flew. The cockpit interfaces and layout are comfortable too.

After we landed and I expressed my interest, Booster had me do all the negotiations on my own. I think I did all right, but I imagine his pal also responded to the silent warning glares Booster gave him from behind me when he tried to add some extra fees. I don't think Booster realizes I noticed.

I didn't expect quite so much paperwork for buying a ship. Definitely need to get a droid. Licenses, permits, registrations, payment agreements, weapons certifications, it just wouldn't end.

But I finally signed that last form, and now I'm the very proud owner of *Solstice*. I have her docked here at Gus Treta for repairs, which I'll be starting on first thing tomorrow.

*I own a ship.*

Captain Wedge Antilles. I like the sound of that.

## Entry 5

I haven't had much of a chance to write in this lately, but I needed to take a break and give my eyes a rest from staring at those tiny circuit boards, so I'll put something in here quick.

I've been spending all my time fixing up *Solstice*. She needed some repairs to be reliably flightworthy, and I'm enjoying modifying and upgrading other systems. It's nice. Keeps me from thinking too much. I'm spending credits hand over fist on parts, and that stuff is not cheap unless it too is broken, but it's not as bad as it could be since I'm doing a lot of the labor myself. Some of the parts I can find for sale here on Gus Treta, others Booster picks up for me.

I was spending the day elbow-deep in the navigation console when I heard Booster come onboard. I thought he was just bringing me another box of parts, but when I looked behind me there was Myra, brandishing this ryshcate at me with a big grin. Booster and Polipe were there too, all squeezed into the tiny cockpit. Booster said they couldn't let my 18th birthday go by without a ryshcate. I was trying not to do anything for it since it only made me miss Mom and Dad, but it's impossible to tell a Terrik something they don't want to hear, so I plastered on a smile, cleaned the grease off my hands and took them down to the little dining area/lounge on *Solstice* where there's at least something that acts as a table. I cleared away enough tools and parts for everyone to sit down, though it was still kind of cramped.

It was really good ryshcate. And it was really good to take a break and just talk and laugh with them a while. When we cut the ryshcate, Booster patted a bulkhead and made a toast to the start of my new life.

Then they brought out my birthday presents. I couldn't believe that after everything they've already done for me lately that they were giving me presents on top of that, but they did. Booster and Polipe were paying for the latest box of parts I'd asked them to get (which they actually did have with them now). Myra, though, she got me this custom-made holder for all the important licensing, insurance, and registration datacards for my ship (that's still so neat to say... *my ship*). It attaches to the side wall in the cockpit so it's always visible and always in reach. The best part is that the holder is emblazoned with the name *Solstice* and there's a tiny holoemitter on top that projects a holo of me and my parents. I got a little choked up.

We talked about how things were progressing with *Solstice*. Soon I'm going to start putting up notices around Gus Treta that I'm accepting freight hauling jobs. Hopefully I can get things going.

So, yeah, overall I'd say it was an okay birthday.

I just really wish Mom and Dad could have been here for it.

## Entry 6

I guess this is the “real world” my teachers always warned me about.

I'd had notices up around Gus Treta for about a week advertising my new freight hauling business. I received no interest, no inquiries, even though I was priced as low as I could possibly afford to be based on operating costs, taxes, and tariffs. Blast, those are expensive. But anyway, how does a market station not have an overabundance of people who need to move goods?

Just when I was starting to go out of my mind, my comlink beeped on my business frequency with what would turn out to be my very first client, Mr. Tel Regen. He needed a few containers of droid parts taken to Duro. I grabbed a hovercart and ran over to meet with him as fast as I could. We signed the agreement, and then I brought the containers to *Solstice* and loaded them up right away. Took me forever to get the paperwork done when all I wanted to do was get going.

I was so excited. When I was finally flying full-throttle away from Gus Treta toward Duro, belting out a few verses of *Corellia Ho!*, I thought everything was well on its way to coming together.

That feeling lasted until I reached Duro, at which point I got stuck in Customs for four hours because I hadn't realized I needed a J-299CD form for this particular cargo along with the KM-330 form, and apparently Customs is a pretty big stickler on that, and J-299CDs are a pain to do on the fly in the field, and long story short, I am never ever forgetting the J-299CD form ever again. I think it took me longer to get through Customs than it did to get from Corellia to Duro. I definitely need a paperwork droid. Good thing this wasn't a time-sensitive delivery or I'd have to be issuing a refund.

When Customs finally let me through, it was a simple enough matter to land in the spaceport, rent a landspeeder and complete the delivery. Things seemed to be looking up.

Then on the way back to Gus Treta, *Solstice's* Engine #1 frequency modulator failed. I don't know why— it tested out fine before I left— but it's fried and beyond repair. I got back to Gus Treta fine, but that's not something I should be flying around interstellar space without, so I have to buy and install a new one before my next freight run, whenever that is.

At first the payment sum looked huge and I was so proud of myself for having earned that much, but once I took out my expenses and the cost of a new frequency modulator, it turns out that I didn't even break even on my first delivery. Hopefully the next one goes more smoothly.

## Entry 7

It took a week to get the engine frequency modulator I ordered, and it was more expensive than I'd first planned for because I had to expedite it up from Corellia. It's getting a little tricky to find some YT-700 parts. After it came in, I got it installed and running smoothly within a few days. During the downtime week I upgraded and tweaked some of the navigational systems. I didn't really like how the interface handled the trip to and from Duro.

I hadn't stopped advertising my freight-hauling business during the downtime, but even so, no new clients commed. I must be doing something wrong— I'll have to ask Booster when he gets back.

About two days after I got *Solstice* up and running again with the new EFM, Mr. Regen commed and asked if I could haul some more droid parts to Duro for him. Of course I accepted, and this time I made blasted sure to have that J-299CD form filled out ahead of time.

Things went fine, I got through Customs and landed in the same orbital city, and I delivered the cargo to the same company and the same guy as before, a Duros named Mr. Ezka Jootai. As we were wrapping up, Mr. Jootai said their regular hauler was grounded with an unforeseen ship repair. He asked, since I was already there, if I was available to deliver some of their repaired droids to their customer on Tinnel IV that day. I jumped at the chance, and while I was gathering the info from him I asked how much his company sells used or refurbished clerical droids for. It was a bit out of my price range though.

I got to Tinnel IV and delivered the droids without a problem. I'd never been to Tinnel IV before, so on a whim I figured I'd stay a bit and take a look around and try to get another hauling job there instead of wasting a trip back to Gus Treta. I didn't bother with a hotel and just slept in *Solstice*, so the spaceport docking fees were my main non-operational expense.

Booster's told me before that you have to spend credits to make credits, so I did some advertising in the spaceport and in some of the nearby restaurants and cantinas. I found some other freighter captains in one and bought a few rounds for them, but as soon as I asked if they knew of any small jobs that weren't worth their while to take on, they essentially dismissed me, like I was too small of an operation to bother with. One guy thought I was trying to horn in on his territory and steal customers out from under him, which is definitely not what I was trying to do (and not that I could, with as small as *Solstice* is), and most of the others seemed to stop taking me seriously. It's aggravating. The crumbs I'm looking for to get established are things they would no-bid anyway due to the size: it's not cost-effective for them to use their huge ships to haul small amounts of cargo.

I took a short break and spent a couple hours sightseeing. It's an interesting planet, and I'd like to see more of it sometime. I just didn't have a chance to with trying to get another hauling job.

I didn't find one, and I stayed probably a day or two too long trying to make it happen. That completely ate my profits from my two latest runs that got me out there. I'm back in Gus Treta now. Hopefully Booster will be back soon and I can ask him the best way to find clients.

## Entry 8

Okay. Problem.

At least the backup hyperdrive is operational for now. I've done all I can at the moment and I'm too wound up to get any sleep in the meantime.

So I recently got a comm from a new client on Tinnel IV. Whether one of those freighter captains sent him my way (doubtful) or he saw one of my advertisements there, I'm not sure. Not that it really matters now. He was willing to pay good credits for a delivery. I needed the money and agreed immediately, then headed there for the pickup.

When I picked up the cargo I found out why he was willing to pay so well: it had to do with all the travel advisories and warnings for an area of space I'd be transiting through. The haulers local to Tinnel IV weren't interested in taking on that risk for a small shipment. But it didn't bother me.

I guess, in hindsight, that it should have.

I was supposed to take the cargo to Lyton Prime. The easiest way to get to the Lyton System without going sublight for several days to get around astronomical hazards is to use a certain, narrow hyperspace corridor. It's not a main route, only tertiary at best. To get to that corridor from Tinnel IV, I had to take the Corellian Run to another, smaller corridor, and transition from that second corridor to the final one in the warning area. Anything other than that would have taken me days out of my way.

Other ships have to do this too. That's why the travel warning is there: too many pirate attacks in that transition system since they know that's where ships have to come out of hyperspace to start the new leg.

Turns out the travel warning was accurate. I was on alert when I dropped out of hyperspace in that transition system. I calculated my new jump as fast as I could, but two ships— a *Neutron Star* Bulk Cruiser and a *Guardian* light cruiser— dropped out of hyperspace in front of me and actively blocked my way. Before I could do much else they opened a comm channel, identified themselves as the Dauntless Pirates and demanded my surrender.

I refused. I think that surprised them, given the apparent odds. They spewed some threats, but honestly I was too angry to be scared. They saw a lone, shabby little YT-700 and expected some easy pickings.

What they didn't realize was that I'd gone up against more dangerous pirates than them and won.

What I didn't realize was that I wasn't in Booster's Z-95 this time.

That made things interesting.

Long story short, *Solstice*'s engines and lone laser cannon got quite a workout. I had to constantly use the *Guardian* cruiser as a shield so the Bulk Cruiser couldn't get a bead on me with its more powerful weapons or tractor beams. During the course of the fight I destroyed the *Guardian* cruiser, and the damn pirates took out my shields, primary hyperdrive, and part of my life support. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to stick around and take out the Bulk Cruiser too, but by then *Solstice* was no longer up to that challenge and I'd destroyed the cruiser I was using for cover. I jumped into hyperspace using the slower backup system as soon as I got the chance and started repairs and damage control.

There were some problems, so once I felt like I'd gotten enough distance, I dropped out of hyperspace to perform the most critical repairs. I had to go extravehicular to patch up a huge

coolant leak from the primary hyperdrive and to reroute power for the life support system. Thankfully I got life support back up and running fully. Shields are slowly recharging.

Now, as long as the backup hyperdrive holds out, I'm limping along to the Lyton System. Records show that there's a small Imperial outpost there; I'll report the pirate attack as soon as I arrive and see if they can help with the most vital repairs. The Imperials will need to help any ships coming in after me since that Bulk Cruiser is still there, and any freighter without an armed escort is going to have problems.

But after I report the pirate activity, I'll complete my delivery. I've still got the cargo.

## Entry 9

Okay, what the hell was that all about?!

When I finally got to Lyton Prime yesterday, I went straight to the Imperial outpost and reported the pirate attack. The Imperial at the desk didn't seem too concerned about the Bulk Cruiser and just logged in the information. The only time he sounded interested was when I told him I'd destroyed the pirates' *Guardian* cruiser while I was trying to escape. He asked me tons of questions about that. I answered them all, but I was confused why he wasn't more interested in the ship that was still a threat. So I asked if he needed any more information to help the ships that would be going out and dealing with the Bulk Cruiser. And get this— he said no, they were too busy to send a ship out. When I asked about the other civilian traffic coming in that might not be armed and would have to get past the pirates, he said that's what the travel advisories are for, that everyone coming in this way knows and accepts the risk.

I was livid. I guess the Imperial thought I was getting a little too aggressive in my arguing because he commed Security and told them to "hurry up". It sounded like they were already on their way. They walked in a second later, and that's when the Imperial said I'd be held there until they determined if I was telling the truth about it being self-defense when I destroyed the other ship. They were going to pull all the data from *Solstice*'s flight computer, comm log and sensor records.

Seriously?! Is this why they're too busy to send out anyone to protect us mere civilians from a known danger? There would be a lot less instances of self-defense out there if the Imperials did their job in the first place! Maybe if the Imperials were more active in responding to these threats, there wouldn't be so many pirates flying around unimpeded to ambush ships or blow up refueling depots!

I ramped back up to livid again pretty quickly. And that was the beginning of my lovely night in the Imperial holding cell. Thankfully they cleared me and let me out today. They said they still don't have the manpower to send any ships in to deal with the Bulk Cruiser, though, and they escorted me out before I could argue any more.

Needless to say, the Imperials are definitely not interested in helping me out with my critical repairs, since I'd "accepted the risk of entering the system via that route in spite of the warnings."

That means *Solstice* is currently at a mechanic's shop. The hyperdrive is too complex for me to fix that damage on my own. They're also going to optimize the shields a bit better— I have to go through that same warning area on my way out of the system and I want to have the best chance possible of making it out, especially if the Bulk Cruiser is still there and brought friends. I'm stuck here for a week while she gets fixed, and I have to pay for lodging this time too. I'll be spending most of that time trying to find new clients. I wanted to comm Booster and see if he could come help with the repairs, but I didn't. I need to deal with this on my own. And even though I know he could have handled it, I would have felt bad to knowingly bring him in past that cruiser.

I finished the delivery, though. The recipient was really happy and grateful to get his cargo. I guess that's something.

## ***Entry 10***

Maybe that good old-fashioned Corellian stubbornness has its advantages.

Not only was the delivery recipient on Lyton Prime happy to find someone willing to bring his cargo in, but apparently he was pretty impressed that I refused to hand it over to the pirates when they threatened to attack. He said he loses lots of cargo that way, and even though the shippers reimburse him for the loss, then it's up to him to go buy the cargo again and try to get it shipped to the planet again. Lots of time and effort wasted.

He was impressed enough that he hired me to haul some cargo off-planet for him, and his recommendation led to two of his associates in other systems also hiring me for hauling jobs immediately after. A third was interested, but *Solstice* wasn't big enough for what he needed to have hauled. I put him in touch with Booster instead.

The mechanics on Lyton Prime fixed up *Solstice* really well— apparently they get a lot of practice repairing ships there— and I headed out with my new load of cargo. I already had *Solstice*'s weapon powered up when I reached the hyperspace transition point where the pirates had been, but I didn't see them anywhere. Not even the Bulk Cruiser. I didn't stick around to look for them.

It's nice to have things going smoothly for a change.

## *Entry 11*

Those last three jobs got me just back to barely even after all that mess on Lyton Prime and the repairs. They're also the last paying jobs I've been able to get, so here I go again, tapping into my decreasing savings to get by each day and scrambling around trying to find another cargo hauling job. It's amazing how quickly momentum can die in this business. Maybe I got a little complacent about things and took it for granted that I'd finally be getting some steadier work. I won't be making that mistake again. Now I know I've always got to be actively marketing my business and not expecting things to fall into my lap. A streak of good fortune won't always continue.

But that streak of good fortune happened once, and that means I can make it happen again. I just have to work at it a bit harder.

Booster, Myra, and Polipe resupplied at Gus Treta today, so I got to see them for a while. Booster thanked me for the referral and asked how I was doing. I told him I was doing fine— I need to try to fix this dry spell on my own first before running to Booster with every problem I have. I also got the chance to tell them more of the details about everything that happened at Lyton Prime. Myra and Polipe seemed pretty concerned, but Booster just kind of grinned when I told them how I fought my way out of the initial pirate attack. He didn't seem surprised at all about the Imperials' reactions, though. He let me vent about it.

When I was done, Booster told me a few amusing stories about his latest cargo runs. It was fun just relaxing and chatting with them, especially Myra. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed them lately. It does get kind of lonely on *Solstice*.

They headed out again a little while ago. Now I'm going to wrap this up and get some sleep. I've got another big day of marketing and job hunting tomorrow.

## Entry 12

My first mistake was to lower my prices below my operating costs. At first it didn't seem like a mistake, since the intention was to entice new customers and establish my business enough that it could survive a small price increase later to meet or exceed costs. Yes, I was getting a little desperate. But it seemed to be working when I got a message from a new customer within hours of advertising my lower prices.

The message was text-based, but from the wording, Ms. Chorkan sounded so relieved to find someone she could "finally afford" to haul something for her. Could I come to Corellia right away to pick it up and deliver it to Loronar? You bet I could. It was kind of far, being over in the Colonies Region, but it was work and it would also give me the chance to see their shipyards like I've always wanted. Something about the aesthetics and the structures of shipyards and how they're designed appeals to both the pilot and the architect in me. (And nothing against the Loronar Corporation, you have nice ships and I realize you're our distant cousins and all, but give me a CEC ship any day.)

So I accepted the job. That was my second mistake.

When I reached the pickup site on Corellia, Ms. Chorkan was there waiting for me. There were only four small crates, and I could see why it wouldn't have been very cost-effective for her to send those with a larger hauler. She said she was very grateful she found me and asked a few questions about my business since she'd never heard of me—how big was the operation, how many employees (ha! I still haven't gotten that droid yet!), that sort of thing. She'd even filled out a lot of the paperwork already. I was quite happy. Ms. Chorkan paid half up-front, and we worked out the details for payment of the second half on delivery, including a bonus for gentle handling of the fragile, valuable items. She stressed that point quite a bit. I loaded the crates onboard carefully, and as soon as I double-checked the paperwork and filled out the remaining forms, I was off. It was straightforward but pricey cargo: eight Corellian flame miniatures, two per crate, packaged very, very well.

The flight to Loronar was kind of long, but *Solstice* and I got there fine. I paid the import/customs fees for Loronar myself to be reimbursed by the recipient upon delivery. Standard stuff. I got to see the shipyards too, and they were really impressive. A lot of the system traffic was comprised of Loronar-built ships, but I didn't feel too out of place in *Solstice* since a sizable minority were Corellian ships. Nice to see our old colony hasn't forgotten its roots.

I had coordinates for a small spaceport on the surface where I was to deliver the crates, so I commed the recipient and headed there. After that long flight I was happy to land.

I was directed to a small hangar on the outer edge of the spaceport. It was a top-entry hangar so the roof retracted to let me land. I have to admit I didn't like it when the roof re-closed over me as soon as I was on the ground; it seemed odd given the expected transitory nature of cargo haulers, but I wrote it off as an automated system. There was lots of random equipment scattered throughout the hangar, though I found a fairly clear area that was big enough to set *Solstice* down in.

A well-dressed Gran and three humans—two men and one woman—were waiting for me when I lowered the cargo ramp. The humans were armed, and the way they moved around him made me think they might be the Gran's bodyguards, though why they were guarding him from me was anyone's guess. He was kind of brusque, especially for a Gran, and didn't seem interested in my customer-friendly small talk. He just wanted the crates unloaded, so after I

confirmed he was the correct recipient, that's what I did.

When I finished I tried to talk to him about the customs fees he owed me and the signature I needed from him confirming delivery of the cargo, but he ignored me and told one of the men to open the crates. I (politely but insistently) tried to tell him not to, that I was still responsible for that cargo until he signed for receipt of it, but the other man and the woman actually physically blocked my way and told me to just hold on, be patient, I'd get my signatures in a second.

They weren't overly aggressive about it, but something still inexplicably made me anxious. Maybe it was the trapped feeling from the closed roof, I don't know. It's weird that the first thing I thought of when they stepped in front of me was that they were cutting me off from my most direct path back to *Solstice*.

Despite my protests, the other guy opened a crate and dug one of the flame miniatures out from all of its packing material. He brought it over to the Gran, who took it and studied it hard for a couple minutes with all three of his eyes. Then the Gran did something that looked like a snarl and barked at the guy to open another crate. The scene repeated again, and after studying the second flame miniature the Gran whirled on me, said they were fakes, and demanded the real ones *now*. He was furious.

First I thought that the Gran thought I stole them and swapped them with these so-called fakes. When I insisted that everything in those crates was what I got from Ms. Chorkan, the Gran demanded to know what she had done with the real ones or if it had been her plan all along to trick him and steal his money. Like I was supposed to know? He kept shouting about the huge debt she owed him and how this had been her last chance to pay him back by sending these expensive flame miniatures, and how these fakes were worthless and she still owed him a huge amount of credits. Despite being only the messenger, I was apparently the only physical link they had to Ms. Chorkan and whatever treachery they believed she had inflicted on them, and they weren't going to let me go until they were satisfied.

When I still insisted I had nothing to do with what Ms. Chorkan did or did not put in the crates, the Gran actually had the gall to say that he could get some of his money by selling my ship. I admit I may have used some language I shouldn't have said to a customer.

And that's when the man and woman blocking my path each grabbed one of my arms. I tried to pull away but they wouldn't let go. To make things even better, the man by the crates pulled his blaster but kept it lowered.

New Rule #1: Buy a blaster.

I'd considered doing that after the pirate mess at Lyton Prime but I'd felt fine with only having *Solstice's* weapon. Now I had nothing.

Luckily after spending all that time growing up riding thaks and herding naugas and nerfs, I don't get intimidated when animals twice my size or larger try to shove me around. And when you get right down to it, there's not much difference between a stubborn nerf and an adult human.

The man next to me had grabbed my right arm to keep me put. I jabbed my knee into the back of his knee. When that sent him (and me) down, I used that momentum and the woman's own grip to pull the woman forward off her feet. I tried to twist around to dislodge her hold.

I'm not quite sure what all happened, but when I tumbled out of the pile onto the floor, I was free. I scrambled to my feet and ducked behind the closest piece of cover I could see, a couple of greasy old mobile servicing carts.

The man by the crates fired at me and hit the first cart. I unlocked the wheels on it and shoved it as hard as I could toward him. I knew the big lumbering thing wouldn't come close to hitting him— all it had to do was make him sidestep away from *Solstice* so I had a clear path to her.

He did move away. By then I had ducked behind the second cart, unlocked its wheels and was pushing it along with me, using it as a shield.

The man and woman behind me were getting to their feet and would have a clean angle on me the second they did, plus the other guy was shooting again. Not good. I saw my cart had a pressurized tank of breathing air on it and a long hose attached to it for dispensing it. I grabbed the coiled hose, threw the free end out straight on the floor on the other side of the cart, and cranked the dial to send full pressure through it. Then I immediately shoved the cart away from me, toward the others.

Looking back, all of that should have been mistake number three. It was a pretty stupid thing to do. The hose came to life just like I'd hoped and started whipping around, making the others have to jump out of the way, but in my initial desperation I hadn't anticipated just how violently that hose was going to be randomly whipping back and forth under such a high pressure. It almost caught me several times in the few seconds it took me to sprint to *Solstice*, and it would have done some damage if it had connected with me.

But it was a sufficient distraction. I jumped into *Solstice* and powered her full up from standby in record time. Got her off the ground seconds after that. I was about to comm the Gran and threaten to blast a hole in the roof with *Solstice's* laser cannon if they didn't open it up, but I didn't have to; it started opening almost immediately. Guess it was an automated system after all.

I peeled out of there. As soon as I caught my breath I went to the Loronar authorities. They were receptive, took my statement, and promised to investigate, but they couldn't give me back the crazy amount of customs fees I'd lost bringing in something that was declared as being incredibly valuable.

After I refueled, I went into a parking orbit above Loronar and tried to comm Ms. Chorkan, but there was no reply on the frequency. After an hour I gave up, sent her a text-based message that there was a problem and to comm me, and started back to Corellia.

By the time I got back to Corellia I'd heard nothing from her, and her frequency wasn't even valid anymore. My text-based messages were getting rejected as undeliverable. All the means I had to contact her were no longer working. And to top it all off, when I checked my business's financial account I saw that she had put a stop payment on the first half of her payment to me. There's nothing my bank can do to get those credits back. So I lost the shipment's down payment, the customs fees, the cargo, and I'm sure there's no way in hell I'll ever see the second half of the payment owed after delivery.

I am not happy.

I did a little digging and found some public records from CorSec saying that Ms. Chorkan has had financial problems for years and some associated arrests. That information would have been easy enough to find if I'd just bothered to look for it, and it would have saved me a *lot* of trouble and credits.

New Rule #2: Check references on every potential customer.

### Entry 13

Things still aren't going as well as I'd like. I put my prices back up to the point where I only break even on operating costs so I'm not such a tempting target for less scrupulous people, but that means I'm only barely staying afloat. Advertising and marketing is costing me credits as well without a whole lot to show for it.

I've gotten a couple small jobs here and there, but like I said, just staying afloat. It's been even harder since I started checking customer references on any potentially expensive hauling jobs. If I have another run like the Loronar one where I lose that much money, I think I'd go out of business. I have to be careful. I want to make this work. So I've been screening any runs that could be a high risk to me and I've even declined a few, though at the same time I feel like beggars can't be choosers. One job I declined was from someone (name was Heff Bekke, I think) whose comm contact info I couldn't confirm in public records and seemed fake or temporary. Another was from a Hutt called Druja which looked like bad news all around, especially after I did some checking into him/her/it. The third was a man named Talon Karrde, and he actually talked to me in person about hauling cargo. But when I checked into him I couldn't even find anything bad. That should have been good for me, but I couldn't shake the feeling that it meant no one knew anything about him. I didn't trust the situation and declined that job too. It killed me to lose the potential credits on those jobs, but I also think I dodged some pretty damaging blaster bolts by saying no.

Speaking of blasters, I now have a blaster pistol. A nice little Merr-Sonn DD6. It's used but solid and reliable, and it shoots well. I practiced with it at the range in Coronet City where I bought it. I hope I never have to use it, but I feel better knowing it's there.

Since I'm getting a bit desperate for work, I sent Booster a message asking for any more tips or ideas on what to do. He suggested I look into markets that might not fit the usual cargo transport profile of "crate and ship". Maybe I'll find a niche or some work with them if I can adjust and cater to their more unique needs that a larger, standard transport company might not be able to accommodate. To that end I'm researching livestock transport. I think I could handle that well with my farm experience, though I'm cringing at the thought of what having livestock aboard for long periods would do to *Solstice's* environmental systems, especially the air filters, water management, and waste disposal. I might need some substantial modifications done if it gets to that point. I'm also looking into offering courier services. Booster stressed the fact that I have to be flexible to get work, so I'll be flexible.

At the end of Booster's reply, he told me to trust myself, that I'd learned a lot from my parents about running a business and managing things and knew more than I probably realized. It was a nice sentiment, I suppose, but I don't think Booster quite thought it through before he sent it. The way they ran their business ended up literally killing them. After all this time I still can't wrap my mind around why in the galaxy they sacrificed themselves for strangers and left me on my own.

It was a hard reminder just then. When I've got work and I'm on a run, I love it. Unless I'm getting shot at, of course, but most of the time that's not the case. I love flying, and I love doing this. But the low points like now when things are getting really hard and causing doubts are when I start missing my parents all over again, and I wish I was still with them instead of worrying about having my livelihood and business go under when I'm barely an adult. Then I start wondering where Syal is and how she's doing on her own, and how I wish we could be on

our own together.

...*Solstice* needs some preventative maintenance done. I'd better get to it.

## ***Entry 14***

I found out that hauling livestock requires more licenses and permits that I don't have and frankly can't afford. *Solstice* is too slow for courier work— the couple people I had inquire about courier services were no longer interested as soon as I told them the expected arrival time at the destination, which was based solely on *Solstice*'s hyperdrive speed (or lack thereof, apparently). I even tried getting some passengers as a private chartered flight, thinking I could add some seats inside *Solstice* easily enough, but for the price I would have to charge just for fuel and consumables, people want to take something a little more... luxurious than an old YT-700.

Being flexible is all well and good until you run out of ideas.

I've had a few standard jobs here and there, but it's not enough. I lose money every day I sit here with no cargo to haul. I've done everything I can think of to stop the bleeding, including moving *Solstice* to the cheapest docking port available on Gus Treta and eating meals that look like some sort of leftover military rations from the Clone Wars, but I'm a laser's edge away from missing a loan payment on *Solstice* for the first time. That prospect scares me. I don't want to lose my ship. I can't.

I contacted Booster again for help finding work. First he told me to move *Solstice* to a cheaper spaceport dirtside on Corellia, but I'd already considered that. After I explained that most of my outgoing transport jobs come from people on Gus Treta and I had almost no existing customer base on Corellia, he grudgingly agreed it might be best in the short-term to stay put. I had to promise to put some serious focused effort into finding a cheaper place on Corellia and establishing a customer base there so I can survive a move as soon as possible, though, so I've been researching options at a few different spaceports all morning.

The good news was that Booster said he knew someone who would have some work for me. He's going to talk to the guy, give him my contact information and let him know I'm available immediately. I really hope this works out. I really need it to.

## Entry 15

The second I get back, I'm going to find out what the *hell* Booster was thinking.

At first it wasn't that bad. I— wait, I'm not even sure if I should write this down. I suppose I'll encrypt it. It's not like they won't find out if they really want to anyway.

So yeah, at first it wasn't that bad, though it wasn't that great either. Not at all what I was expecting when Booster said he found me some work. Here I am, trying to keep my business legal, and what does he do? He sets me up with a smuggling job.

Earlier he said that I have to be flexible. Well, I've been trying, but there's "flexible" and then there's this. Being too flexible lets you get tied up in knots.

And this wasn't just any smuggling job. This was a smuggling job for some *rebels*. No, no, nothing illegal at all in this equation. Just like that, I saw my nice little business's reputation go up in flames, and my family's reputation too.

Okay, so maybe that was a little melodramatic. After all, it's not like my parents had any qualms about being good friends with Booster despite his smuggling activities, but it felt different when the illegal activities were going to be on the Antilles side directly. I don't think Mom and Dad would have wanted that.

I came really close to turning down the job right then and there, but the financial pressure got the better of me. I really needed the credits, and they were offering good money.

The man who hired me was called Mr. Contos, though I know that's not his real name. I don't know what his real one is, and I told myself I didn't need to since Booster was acting as his reference and I trusted Booster. Mr. Contos had some crates of havod alloy sheets as the cover ("legitimate") cargo and some smaller boxes that he needed to have brought in secretly. He didn't tell me what was in them, and I didn't ask. The hard part was that it was all going to an Imperial planet, so any sniff of smuggling or rebel activity would bring them down on me rather unpleasantly.

*Solstice* doesn't have smuggling compartments, but I'd learned enough tricks from flying with Booster on some of his runs that it wasn't a problem to get the smaller boxes onboard and hidden from both sight and scanners. Then Mr. Contos gave me my destination, the recipient's contact information, and half my payment, and I was off.

I couldn't relax the entire flight to Gendrah-Narvin. It's way over in the Inner Rim so it was a long one. Every minute *Solstice* was on autopilot I was pacing. I convinced myself five times to cancel the job and turn around, and five times I talked myself into keeping the job and continuing on. It wasn't a coincidence that each of those latter five times occurred when I got to the cockpit and saw what I'd be giving up by going back and not getting that money. I can't lose my ship. In a lot of ways, it's all I've got.

When I reached the Gendrah-Narvin system, I hit the point of no return and strangely felt a bit better now that any other options were off the table and the path ahead was set. Besides, this was the only time I was going to take an illegal job— I'm not going to be making a habit of this. I got into orbit and went through customs. I was a little nervous, but I'd been through similar things on a couple of Booster's runs so I knew what not to say just as much as what to say, and I got through without an issue.

While heading down through atmo I commed the recipient. She wanted me to come to a different spaceport and deliver to a different address than the ones I'd originally been given by Mr. Contos. I was a bit annoyed at that but I diverted like she asked. I don't know if it was a

security measure or if her plans changed or what.

It was a dumpy, dirty little spaceport in what looked to be a dumpy, dirty little city. I rented a landspeeder and loaded the phony cargo in. It took me a bit to find some discreet hiding places in the landspeeder for the smuggled boxes, but I did and I headed out.

When I arrived at the new address, the recipient was waiting for me. She was a Gotal, tall with matted brown fur and hair, and she introduced herself as Kellarkai. I'm sure that wasn't her real name either. A man was there too, but he stayed quiet and I didn't catch his name. He seemed wary of me. I was glad I had my blaster.

I tried to keep contact minimal— the less I know about stuff like this, the better— but Kellarkai kept trying to talk with me as I showed her the phony cargo and then pulled out one of the smuggled boxes. I know enough about Gotals to guess that she was their sentient lie detector, trying to figure out if they could trust me or not. I must have passed because she eventually seemed satisfied that I had the correct cargo and told me not to unload it there. I had to drive the two of them to another building where it could be unloaded. Okay, sure, I just wanted this job to be over with and the credits in my hand.

From the passenger seat Kellarkai gave me real-time directions through town. We doubled back a few times and took some needless turns, but I didn't let on. Finally we got to the back of a plain-looking building and pulled into the garage. The door closed, the lights came on, and four people were standing around us and lowering blasters that had been pointed at us. Kellarkai and Quiet Guy got out like it was no big deal, and three of the others came to talk to them for a minute. I stayed put. Then Kellarkai motioned me out and asked me to unload all the cargo in the corner.

So I did. One of the four new people, a woman maybe ten years older than me, came to help me unload everything. Bubbly's a good wood for her. She managed to squeeze more friendliness into those fifteen minutes than most people do in a week. She was so happy to get whatever was in the smuggled boxes and kept making chit-chat while we worked, like how was my flight coming in, how long have I been flying, where I'm from, what my favorite food was so she could recommend a good local place before I headed out, things like that. Bubbly. And packing a well-worn blaster twice the size of my own.

When we were finished Kellarkai inspected the contents of all the smuggled boxes. She was hard to read but she seemed pleased, and she and the bubbly woman brought me to an office inside the building for my other half of the payment and the customs fees. Kellarkai paid me, and she asked if I would be interested in bringing in cargo for them again. I declined, but she didn't seem like she believed me and started trying to convince me of the good the rebel group was doing and how they needed all the help they could get. That's when the commotion started.

I'm still not exactly sure what happened. There was a huge bang from near the front of the building and then lots of shouting and running bootfalls and weapons fire. Even Kellarkai hardly had time to react before the door to the office was kicked open and I found myself staring down the muzzle of an Imperial stormtrooper's E-11 blaster rifle.

The bubbly woman shoved me to the ground right before the stormtrooper fired. Next thing I know she's falling down dead right beside me.

There was a whole lot more blasterfire above me. More out of self-preservation than anything else, I pulled out my blaster pistol, scooted around the desk I was behind, and fired at a second stormtrooper who had just come into the doorway. It looked like Kellarkai killed the first one. My aim was off and his armor absorbed the shot, but it made him stagger. Kellarkai fired

and downed him too. Then Kellarkai ran out of the office while yelling at me to stay there. More shooting sounded from other areas.

I don't know how long it lasted. I had other things on my mind. It was obvious that if the bubbly woman hadn't intervened, she'd still be alive and I'd be the one lying there dead. Finally I had to turn away from the sight of her blood and mortal blaster wound. I was pretty shaken up and thought I was going to be sick.

After the shooting stopped at last, Kellarkai and a couple others came back to the office to check on me and the bubbly woman. They all were very distraught at her death. I knew that look.

Kellarkai said something about an Imperial raid and asked if I was all right, and for some reason I just snapped. I yelled some things at them like who do they think they are, why do they have to go and get themselves killed when other people still need them, and probably a few other similar tirades. Looking back now I guess I overreacted a bit, and I think I surprised them as much as I surprised myself. Kellarkai started to say something, but I wouldn't listen. I was too angry at everything and on the verge of losing it so I hurried back to the landspeeder and took off back to the spaceport. I was off the ground as soon as I could get power to *Solstice's* engines and clearance from control.

Booster owes me a damn good explanation.

## Entry 16

Blast, I keep forgetting what a temper Mirax can have.

When I got back I tried to track down Booster. I heard he was on Drall, so I took *Solstice* and went over there since it's so close. I wanted to talk to him in person. But when I arrived I found out I'd missed him and he'd recently left on a run, so I sent him a comm message to get in touch with me. I'd already paid the spaceport fees so I stayed on Drall the rest of the day. A little change of scenery did me good.

I've kept *Solstice* and myself synched to Gus Treta's local clock to make things easier on me, and it was the middle of my personal night when Booster commed me back. I got up and opened the comm. I wasn't sleeping much anyway, and I really needed to talk to him and hash this out.

When Booster appeared on the holo, I saw Myra was there with him too. They said Polipe was up in *Skate*'s cockpit.

Booster said he was glad to see me and asked how the job went. Just like that. All casual.

I thought I'd cooled down on the long flight back from Gendrah-Narvin, but apparently I didn't cool down as much as I'd thought. I immediately demanded to know what he was thinking when he gave me that work. He looked surprised and asked what I meant, as if he didn't know, so I explained. Loudly. Quite heatedly, too.

I "explained" how the job was horrible and I wished I'd never gone on it. I explained how smuggling wasn't doing the legality of my business any favors. I explained how working for *rebels* certainly wasn't helping either. I explained how I'm already so close to going under that any sort of investigation from the Imperials or CorSec would do me in, both financially and reputation-wise, and I can't risk giving them anything to wonder about.

That was only my warmup. I was just about to explain in great detail how getting shot at by Imperials and seeing nice people get killed in cold blood centimeters away from me was completely unacceptable, but before I could, Booster had apparently gotten very tired of being yelled at by me and cut me off. He wouldn't let me get a word in edgewise as *he* "explained" how this was good work, that I'd needed it, that the legality of my business makes it even less likely to ping the Imperials' awareness so it's safer for me than other smugglers and I won't get investigated if I stay smart about things.

When he finally paused the slightest bit, I jumped to refute the first thing I could. He was wrong about this, and I had to make sure he knew that and would stop trying to argue and put this on me, like it was my idea or my fault. I argued that this work wasn't good and wasn't the kind that I needed and I couldn't believe he put me in that position, or that he even thought I should be involved in illegal, deadly work when the job originally came up with his contact. He shot back that they said they needed someone skilled and trustworthy, and he told them that was me.

That's when Mirax plunged in with all laser cannons blazing. She started in on me about how ungrateful I was being, and how I was the one who had asked for help in the first place, and how Booster had helped me when I really needed it and this was the thanks he got, and what the hell was wrong with me that I was acting this way?

Things went downhill for a while then. Dropping a fully loaded cargo container on my foot would have been more enjoyable and more productive than those next few minutes of arguing with both of them was. It wasn't until I was completely fed up with their trying to defend against my first, more minor complaints and I managed to blurt out about the shooting that

Booster started to pause and listen. I guess I should have started with the worst part first, but the whole “discussion” didn’t go at all the way I’d expected for either side. Both Booster and Myra gave me this “Well, why didn’t you say so?” look when I finally was able to get down to the heart of the problem. The family resemblance was uncanny.

So emotions were still a little high on each side, but at least they heard me out. Booster tried to talk me out of it when I told him I wouldn’t take any more smuggling jobs and no jobs for any rebels– he told me I was tying my own hands at the time I could least afford to do so– but eventually he let me make my own decision and just said to let him know if I change my mind. I know I won’t, though. Not after what happened.

I’m glad all that’s over with and behind me now. The credits I got from that run mean I’ve got a tiny bit of breathing room, but not much. It was just enough to pay all the bills that were due immediately or past due. It’s time to focus on finding my next customer, wherever they are. Maybe I’ll do some advertising on Drall while I’m here.

One thing’s for certain: having two Terriks angry at me is something I never want to experience again.

## Entry 17

It turns out that staying on Drall for a day was a good thing. I got to see a Drall Wingrider flying on an ibbot, but that's not the only reason why it was good.

I got back to sleep after talking to the Terriks, and when I woke up it was local evening. I went out to do some more marketing and wound up in a little spacer cantina near the spaceport. This time buying drinks for the other ship captains paid off. One of them told me about two Drall who needed to hire a small ship, but she couldn't take the time out of her schedule to do that job. She gave me their contact info, and I bought her another drink as thanks and commed them.

The two Drall were excited to hear from me and arranged a meeting almost right away to talk details. Dahnes and Hecha were scientists and had some crazy, delicate botanical analysis equipment they needed to take to Ithor for an experiment. They didn't trust shipping it separately while booking a commercial transport for themselves, so they were looking to stay with their equipment the whole way there and back on a charter flight. Of course I told them I'd be happy to fly them. They asked to see the ship, so I gave them a quick tour of *Solstice*, and they gave me some references when I asked. We signed a contract (pending the reference check, but it came back good), and Dahnes and Hecha said they'd be back in the morning with their equipment, ready to go. I couldn't understand the Drallish they were speaking to each other when they left, but they sure seemed eager about the trip.

While they were gone I got *Solstice* ready for the long flight. Refilled all the consumables, refueled, calculated the navigation vectors, and ran a full diagnostic on the repulsorlift to make sure it was good. Hecha and Dahnes had told me all about the tricky part of their flight—ships weren't allowed to land on the surface of Ithor, so they'd be paying me extra to keep *Solstice* hovering below treetop level while they opened the side hatch and lowered their experiment out on a cable in midair for the data. Because that would be the perfect time for a repulsor malfunction. But the coils all checked out fine.

I also moved most of my stuff out of my small quarters. Living in the cockpit for a week wouldn't kill me, and for charter flights like this it seemed better for the customers to have the room. I wish *Solstice* had more than one living area for times like this.

I was ready when they showed up bright and early the next morning, and we loaded their equipment and luggage and lifted off.

There's nothing like a cross-galactic voyage cooped up in a small space to really get to know someone. A lot of the time we were in hyperspace so there wasn't much for me to do enroute, and Dahnes and Hecha took that time to passionately explain to me, in detail, all the workings of their experiment, all their theories, and what they were hoping to learn on Ithor. I followed fine for the first hour but after that I was lost. But they were excited and proud of their work, so I tried to at least sound supportive.

They also told me all about their families. What I didn't realize at first was that they were cousins, and they weren't shy about trying to outdo the other with funny stories about the others in their clan. I didn't get all of the cultural jokes, but Dahnes and Hecha were having fun. I got the feeling these two were the more lighthearted members of their clan and spent lots of time together because of that. They told me about their Duchess, their sisters and brothers, and every other relative who was dating someone or not dating someone or having job problems or raising young or had fur that was going grey prematurely or who said something dumb or anything else that came up.

Once, early on, Hecha asked me something about my father. It caught me by surprise, and after all the ugliness from that smuggling job I admit I was a little shorter with him than I should have been when I said I didn't want to answer. He apologized and neither of them brought up my family again. But the weird thing was that, as the next couple hours passed and they told me funny stories about their siblings and parents, I kind of wanted to join in. At one point they'd just finished talking about a mutual aunt who was having some crazy dealings with bureaucracy in hiring a new employee where she worked, and before I knew it I was telling them a funny story Mom had told me about when she and Dad had first started the refueling depot— the one where something got mixed up in the paperwork somewhere and the Corellian employment system thought their droid was a flesh-and-blood employee and some clueless bureaucrat dirtside insisted the droid get health and retirement benefits. Dahnes said he was going to retell that story to his aunt.

And I enjoyed telling the story. I think that's the first time since everything happened that I've thought about Mom and Dad and smiled. It didn't last forever— I started to get sad and miss them again— but it was strange realizing it was possible to be happy again when thinking about them. I ended up telling a couple more stories during the flight, but I was nowhere near the level Dahnes and Hecha were at.

Other than that, the trip to Ithor was uneventful. We docked at one of the floating cities and got the appropriate clearance (apparently Hecha and Dahnes had been working with an Ithorian scientist here and had set everything up well ahead of time). Seeing trees and moss on something purely technological like a floating city is strange. I want to read up on those cities a bit more when I have some time, especially the engineering behind how they made them. Anyway, we got some rest and flew down to the surface the next morning. Ithor is actually a fascinating planet. I don't think I've ever seen so much green in one place in my life. The plants and waterfalls were amazing, and I saw some pretty interesting animals too.

Keeping *Solstice* stationary in midair isn't that hard of a feat, but keeping her stationary in midair for a couple hours at a time *is*, especially when it's windy and there are huge trees mere meters away on each side. But I got it done. Hecha and Dahnes would get a couple hours' worth of readings on their equipment, I'd fly us back to a floating city for a short break and let them compile their data, and then we'd go back down for a couple more hours. We cycled through this routine a few times, and then repeated it all the next day as well.

At one point they got particularly animated about the data they were receiving. I guess they got something exciting in it. I hope so.

On the evening of the second (and last) day of data-gathering they asked me to fly to a particular floating city, Tafanda Bay, the capital. While they went out and met with their Ithorian colleague, presumably over dinner, I scrounged up some dinner of my own locally (note to self: avoid the ooglata eggs next time) and prepped *Solstice* for the flight back to Drall. It took me a while to clean the Drall fur out of the environmental filters.

We left the next morning, and we're on our way back now. Dahnes and Hecha are back in the cargo hold going over their data and chattering to each other in excitement about it. In Drallish. I elected to stay up here in the cockpit, take a little break and write this. Besides, it's not like I'm missing much— even from the other end of the ship I can still hear them.

This was a good run, and it's coming with a good payment too. See, I don't need any jobs with rebels to keep my business afloat. I can make this work on my own terms. It'll be fine.

...And now I'm curious if Hecha's niece is going to quit her job and go back to school to

study in the same field as her boyfriend. Maybe Hecha and Dahnes will hire me again for a flight and I can find out.

## ***Entry 18***

I got the inside of my quarters back to normal on *Solstice* and cleaned all the fur out. It's good to be moved back in there.

Since that charter flight I've had a job here, a run there, but nothing much and nothing consistent. I'm still focusing mostly on freight hauling, but I'm trying out some more advertising as a charter flight pilot since the flight with Dahnes and Hecha worked out pretty well for me.

The Terriks are here for some maintenance on *Skate*, so I've gotten to see them a bit while I've got downtime too. That's been fun. I fixed *Skate's* reaction chamber for them as an apology for my little blowup. Myra got a laugh out of some of the stories I retold about Dahnes's and Hecha's family antics, and later today Booster's going to go over my budget numbers with me to see if he has any ideas on how to help.

But in the meantime, I'm just looking for work. There's got to be some out there somewhere. Wish I could find it.

## Entry 19

Mom and Dad always encouraged me to never give up. They told me to work hard because persistence pays off, nothing good ever comes easily, the longer the odds the sweeter the prize. I know that mindset is what allowed them to open and operate the refueling station. I saw them put it into practice quite often.

But they also raised me to think and use my head.

Lately those two philosophies have been in conflict. That stubborn Antilles streak says, “Keep going,” but the rational brain says, “This isn’t working and you have to stop.”

I’ve long since lost the financial buffer from the smuggling job and the charter flight. Truth is, those never really got me back above water, they only let me tread it for a bit longer, and I was down pretty deep at that point already. Since then I’ve just kept sinking. I’ve looked hard for work, and I’ve even contacted people I’ve hauled freight for previously to see if they needed anything else shipped, but nothing’s come up. The only thing coming in are bills I can’t pay.

I’ve come to the hard conclusion that I’m just too small of an operation with too small of a freighter. People who need to ship something that would fit in *Solstice*’s hold instead take it to a larger commercial company who tosses their tiny cargo in a corner of one of their massive haulers that’s going roughly the same direction anyway, and they get charged a fraction of the price it would cost me to take it direct on a dedicated flight. As much as the stubborn part of me wants to figure out the business model to make this succeed, the realistic part of me can no longer justify throwing away everything I’ve got left when it’s obvious my best wasn’t good enough.

Making that decision kept me awake for a couple of nights. I’ve tried hard to make this work. I really did. But even Booster couldn’t find a legal way to improve my numbers that I hadn’t already attempted, and he helped me brainstorm for hours.

The obvious solution is to sell *Solstice*, shut down my business, and go find another job or do something else, like refocus on architecture. But my stubborn side isn’t going to let my rational side have all the victories here— I love my ship and enjoy flying her too much, so I’m going to keep her, sensibilities be damned. Flying so much, traveling so much, experiencing so much with *Solstice* is the only thing that’s kept me distracted and sane since Mom and Dad died. I don’t think I could handle a monotonous office job right now. However, keeping her means I have to find a way to afford her, so I was back to square one with how to drastically change my business to do that.

It reminded me of another time I was really stuck, when I was building that little droid for that school project years ago. Blast, that thing drove me nuts. I got the basics operational, but then I added on a whole lot of modifications and the next time I turned it on it went crazy and wouldn’t work anymore, not even the basic functions. I spent days trying to fix the modifications with no luck, and I was so frustrated. When I finally got fed up and went to Dad for help getting the droid operational again, he told me I was making it too complicated and to take a deep breath and a step back. Then he said something simple like, “It worked before, right? Put it back to how it was then, when it worked. Once you’ve got that done and good, *then* take the next step with the modifications.” I had to scrap a lot of work, but that did let me get the droid working again.

So then I tried to figure out when the last time was that I got enough credits to feel comfortable for a while, because that’s the point where my business was working, and those are

the conditions I had to recreate and the point I had to start over from. I wasn't too happy to realize that point was the smuggling job with the rebel group.

I thought long and hard about that— it caused another few sleepless nights. What would it mean for me if I took more work like that? What would it mean for me if I didn't? Was it really that bad if I did it to supplement my regular, legal business and allowed it to stay afloat? After all, Booster and Myra are good people, and they smuggle things. Maybe Booster can point me in the direction of smuggling some harmless things for people who aren't rebels and aren't too dangerous, but I don't have a lot of time to get that set up before I run out of money completely. At least for now, the rebel group is a somewhat known quantity with a potentially quick starting time.

I finally made up my mind sometime around 0300 hours last night. Booster's never going to let me live this down after my whole "No more smuggling for rebels!!!" self-righteous stand, but this morning I commed Mr. Contos, the guy who hired me for the job last time. He remembered me, and I asked if he had any shipments he needed to have delivered. He said he did, and he's putting something together for me to pick up later today.

Besides, that Imperial raid last time had to be a fluke. There's no way it'll happen again at the same time I meet with the rebel group, and that means I'll get the credits to afford *Solstice* without having to deal with all that other ugly stuff. In and out. No lingering. Drop off, get credits, leave. I can handle that.

I hope I'm doing the right thing.

I bought a small on-board caf machine for *Solstice* this morning. I couldn't really afford it, but I needed it.

## Entry 20

Mr. Contos's shipment was going to Kellarkai on Gendrah-Narvin again. The cover cargo was the same, but the crates he needed to have smuggled in were much bigger than the first ones were. It took some creativity to find shielded hiding locations for them on *Solstice*.

Now that I knew what to expect, I felt more confident going in. I was still a little nervous going through customs, but everything worked out fine.

Like before, after I cleared customs Kellarkai asked me to divert to a different city than the one the delivery address showed. It wasn't the same as the city I landed at the first time, but I wasn't really surprised that they moved after that Imperial raid. She told me someone would meet me.

It turned out that someone was Quiet Guy from last time. He hadn't gotten much more vocal since then either. He gave me another suspicious stare and barely said two words to me except to tell me he wanted to be the one driving the rented landspeeder with the cargo in it. I let him. He took us on an even crazier maze of a course than before, and finally we parked inside the garage of a building on the outskirts of the city.

There was only one blaster-bearing member of the welcoming committee here this time, and Quiet Guy just told me to unload the cargo, and after he'd take a look I'd get the rest of my payment. I did. I was liking this: exactly what I'd hoped for in terms of "get in, get out."

When Quiet Guy seemed satisfied that I'd brought everything I was supposed to, he said Kellarkai was busy but she wanted to see me quickly anyway and give me my payment. The implication was to not take up much of her time, but he didn't have to worry: I didn't want to anyway. The sooner I left, the happier I'd be. The garage was connected to the main building, and he led me out of the garage into an interior hallway and down to a larger room.

As soon as I was in the hallway I could hear voices, mostly a husky one that sounded very distressed. Kellarkai's voice was there too, but quieter.

When we got to the room I saw Kellarkai sitting on a chair across from a Mon Calamari with silverish skin. Other people, some of whom I vaguely recognized from before, were standing quietly along the walls watching Kellarkai and the Mon Cal. The Mon Cal noticed the two of us come in, and he jumped, his huge eyes instantly darted to me, and he asked Kellarkai who I was. He sounded terrified.

It surprised me. Why in the galaxy would someone be scared of *me*? I took a better look to try to figure that out while Kellarkai tried to soothe him and briefly explained what I was doing there. The Mon Cal was very skinny and had a few welts and bruises on his skin. There was a fresh-looking bacta patch on the back of his neck, and he was frantically clutching what looked like a comm jammer to his chest. Kellarkai told him she'd be right back, and when she stood up the Mon Cal pulled that jammer so close to himself I thought it would fuse into his skin.

Kellarkai took me to another room, said it was good to see me again, thanked me, and gave me the rest of my payment. I couldn't help myself and asked who the Mon Cal was and why he had a jammer. Kellarkai said he was a slave they'd helped escape from the Imperials in a neighboring city at one of the factories, and they'd just surgically removed the slave tracker in his neck. The jammer had been preventing any kill commands from reaching the tracker while it was still implanted and he didn't trust letting go of it yet. Then she said they could always use a hand if I was looking for more work.

I left soon after, but I've been thinking a lot on the flight out now. I thought I'd be going

over my finances the whole way back and figuring out how best to use this nice payment and finally have some breathing room again, but... I'm not. Got other things on my mind.

## Entry 21

My architectural knowledge recently came in handy in the “real world”: it helped me figure out, structurally, where I could remove plating and the support frame to install smuggling compartments in *Solstice*. Sure, technically it’s different from ship building and engineering, but it gave me the starting points I needed. Booster gave me some tips on the details for shielding and stuff, and to his credit, he didn’t rub my face in the fact that I changed my mind about smuggling after how adamant I’d been about not doing it. He just told me to be careful, be smart, and watch my back. Myra, on the other hand, pounced on it and gave me a good bit of teasing.

The compartments were a bit expensive, but I figured I’ll be needing them now if I continue on this path. Given that my regular business is still pretty slow, I imagine I’ll be on this path for a little while.

I got the compartments installed just in time for a comm from Mr. Contos. He had an urgent delivery to be picked up on Gendrah-Narvin and taken to the Yetnis System. They were short on funds and could only pay me my standard rate, not the extra they’d given me the last two times. I went anyway: some credits were better than none at all.

I landed empty, which simplified things, and Kellarkai met me in yet another city. She and her group were focused on getting two large crates and several smaller ones onto *Solstice* as fast as I’d let them— they seemed really anxious to get it moving.

I was beginning to recognize more of the individuals in the group now. Quiet Guy was there, as talkative as always. There was a smaller woman who carried a blaster rifle, and on her arm she has a faded tattoo of what looks like those things called lightsabers the Jedi used to carry. A tall, freckled kid who I swear has to be younger than me was around again, and he seems pretty easy-going, though he’s got some nasty scars on his hands. The female Gran apparently took Quiet Guy’s share of vocal cords, and this was the first time I saw her without her three eyes glued to a datapad and her lips glued to a comlink. The Mon Cal was even there. He was still clutching that comm jammer but he wasn’t quite the skin and bones he’d been last time I saw him. I didn’t recognize the couple other people.

Everyone kept looking to the Mon Cal for guidance as they loaded the two big crates from a landspeeder into *Solstice*’s hold. He seemed like he knew the most about what they were moving but was too hesitant to tell them what to do. He would make timid suggestions to Kellarkai who would repeat them, verbatim and more loudly, to the group. The two crates were so big that they barely fit in my new smuggling compartments.

The small woman with the blaster rifle and the lightsaber tattoo announced she was coming with me to deliver the crates. I wasn’t going to argue with her. She said that once we got to Yetnis she would tell me exactly where to go and would make contact with the group we were delivering the crates to. We launched and had no issues on the way out.

Lightsaber wasn’t much into small talk or even telling me her name, so most of the flight passed in silence. When we neared the Yetnis System, she told me to come out of hyperspace, gave me new coordinates nearby and had me jump there. I really didn’t like having that sprung on me at the last second, but my little Merr-Sonn DD6 and I didn’t say anything.

Those coordinates were just outside the Yetnis System, and there was a CR-90 there waiting for us. Lightsaber immediately got on the comm with them and was obviously expecting them, so I relaxed a bit. She arranged a docking between *Solstice* and the CR-90, but told me to keep my blaster handy because she “didn’t really trust that captain.” That made me feel *loads*

better.

After the docking tube was in place between our two ships, the pressure was equalized, and the hatches were open, I stayed nearby to keep an eye on things but I let Lightsaber do the talking. The executive officer of the other ship came over to meet us on *Solstice* and discussed things with Lightsaber. I caught enough of the conversation to piece together that our crates contained a large vehicle-mounted weapon that a rebel cell on Yetnis needed pretty badly to fight the Imperials there (it sounded like that rebel cell was on the verge of losing and being wiped out), and to get the vehicle weapon, the other ship would be trading a bunch of medical supplies, hand-held weapons and power packs, and a few random spare parts.

It was a hasty negotiation, and when Lightsaber agreed to it she asked me to assist the other ship's personnel with unloading our crates and doing the swap. I did, but I couldn't help but wonder what kind of destruction I was enabling by assisting this group in getting this weapon. This is probably why I shouldn't ask too many questions about what I carry if I'm going to be smuggling cargo.

I breathed easier once the trade was done, the airlock was sealed, and the strangers were off my ship. Lightsaber told me to head back to Gendrah-Narvin. Once we were on our way I came back to the hold and helped her put our new crates in the smuggling compartments.

Partway into the flight, we were both sitting in the cockpit. It had been quiet for a while, and I couldn't help myself: I asked what the Yetnis rebels were going to do with that large weapon. Lightsaber brought up some public news holos on the computer showing the aftermath of some recent heavy fighting in a city in Yetnis and some disturbing headlines, and simply said they were going to fight against that. Neither of us pressed the issue any further.

A little later on, Lightsaber motioned to the customized document holder Myra had gotten me with the projected holo of me and my parents, and she asked me something innocuous, like if either of my parents hauled cargo too. I gave her a real brief summary of what had happened to them. She said she was sorry. I thought that was the end of it until a few minutes later when she said she and the others in Kellarkai's group were trying to stop the Imperials from destroying families the way those pirates did, and how Imperial corruption allowed many pirate groups to continue operating if they were profitable enough to provide bribes.

When I didn't ask her to stop, she kept going. By the time we'd arrived back at Gendrah-Narvin, she'd told me about the local Imperial factories that were strangling the planet's economy and destroying its ecosystem, and why Kellarkai's group was opposing it, and why they opposed the Empire in general (including specific examples of things I hadn't heard of). She told me about that Mon Cal's slavery, and about how her husband had disappeared months ago after publicly protesting the Imperials' treatment of the slaves there and exposing the signs that showed the planet's employment and finances would eventually come to rely totally on the Imperial factories' presence or the entire local economy would collapse, so the whole world would always be in bound servitude to the Empire. Lightsaber still didn't know if he was alive or dead.

I didn't really know what to say to all that, so I didn't say much of anything. I took *Solstice* back down to the surface (and I was very relieved to see that the smuggling compartments worked and got us through Customs without an issue), dropped off Lightsaber, and got my payment.

It's been a series of really long flights all in a row, and I'm wiped out so I got a cheap hotel room on Gendrah-Narvin for the night. I love my ship but I needed some time off of it, and

the credits I just got made the prospect of a nicer bed too tempting. Going to sleep now.

## *Entry 22*

That next morning on Gendrah-Narvin I wasn't in a big hurry to get back to Corellian space, so I walked around the city near my hotel just to see what the planet was like from ground level without the pressure of an illegal shipment hanging over my head. I wished I remembered what restaurant the Bubbly Woman had recommended to me the first time I'd been to G-N: I would have flown over and tried to go there for lunch.

According to the public transportation signs and maps, there was an Imperial factory in the city where I stayed. I was admittedly curious and a bit skeptical about some of the things Lightsaber had told me on the flight back, so I decided to explore that area.

It was odd. Even though it was a brisk, sunny day, the mood all around seemed overcast. People didn't seem happy. The intracity maglev I took held some locals that, judging by their clothes, were going to work to start their shift in the factory, and they just looked worn down. The cluster of stores in the blocks nearest the factory were shabby. The locals—civilians—tended to actively avoid any uniformed Imperials in the street. I saw two Imperials walking into the factory with three skinny Nosaurian slaves. It was a disgusting sight.

From the outside it was hard to tell for sure what the factory produced, but I think it was textiles. Maybe for Imperial uniforms or speeder interiors or something. From a short conversation I overheard on the maglev between two workers, I think one of the factories in another city has something to do with weapons production.

I didn't stay very long. The depression there was starting to be contagious.

I've been back to G-N a few more times since then. Yes, I'm actually getting busy! It's a good feeling. Kellarkai's group is starting to trust me more, I think, and they've been paying me to pick up crates from them and deliver them to other systems, and the last two times Lightsaber didn't even feel the need to come along. I've also been contacted by a couple other people in different systems to smuggle some things out, and have done that. On a hunch during my initial reference checks I asked Kellarkai if she knew them, and she said she'd recommended me to them.

See, this is what I wish my regular shipping business was like. Keeping busy, flying to places I'd never even heard of, feeling like I'm accomplishing something.

I still have some hesitations about getting too involved with people fighting the entire galactic government, but I'd be lying if I said it's not starting to feel a bit exciting to slip things through under the nose of said galactic government. With all their resources, all their manpower, all their technology, I never thought that little me by myself could get away with something like this. Each time, I try to figure out how to do it better too. I never realized how much I'd really picked up from Booster on his smuggling runs.

Besides, it's a bit hard to feel sorry for this great galactic government when the silver-skinned Mon Cal still flinches and whimpers if someone nearby so much as sneezes unexpectedly. It's good to see him looking less gaunt every time I swing by though. On my last pickup I caught myself doing a mental checklist of the group to make sure everyone was still there and hadn't been caught. The freckled kid and I had a pretty good discussion about grav-ball, too, though his taste in teams leaves a lot to be desired.

## Entry 23

I think I crossed some lines today without entirely meaning to.

The first one was more subtle and almost the more unexpected of the two. I was on G-N with Kellarkai working out some shipment details between several different groups and systems. Kellarkai has seemed unusually intent on making certain this series of deliveries and shipments goes through successfully. I think her group is planning something big soon—Freckled Kid and Chatty Gran have both implied as much in some of our conversations the last couple weeks— and these shipments have some important role in it or are needed to pull it off. I'm curious about what's going on.

Anyway, I was working out details with her when I got a comm on my business frequency. Someone wanted me to transport regular, legal cargo. And I turned them down. I might have had time to go out there and do the job in between two of the transportation legs I was working out with Kellarkai, but if anything would have delayed me on Kellarkai's job then I would have missed the legal cargo pickup. Plus I didn't want to mess anything up with Kellarkai's plans. I chose the smuggling job over the legit one. I blame Booster. Just because I can.

And who knows, maybe it was for the best that I turned down that job, because I almost *was* considerably delayed. The other line I crossed today happened when I almost got caught.

It was when I was leaving orbit of Nubia with some smuggled cargo I'd picked up there to take to Denon per Kellarkai's directions. The Imperials at Nubia cleared me through customs and I was on my way out. I don't know what it was— if someone belatedly caught something funny in a sensor scan, if they'd detected something else, or what— but suddenly the Imperials were revoking my clearance and ordering me to stop and prepare to be boarded. Several of their customs ships intercepted me.

Any sane galactic citizen would have stopped and tried to reason with the Imperials, maybe talk their way through it or humbly pay some fine and be on their way. But me? No. In one second I was convinced that if they suspected me of something, they'd tear my ship apart looking for evidence, and that evidence wouldn't be hard to find. I couldn't disappoint Kellarkai when she was trusting me with getting this important stuff moved around and in place for whatever they were planning. That meant I absolutely had to get away from the Imperials. And that in turn meant— yup, I fired at them.

Ladies and gentlebeings, I present to you the only son of the late, upstanding citizens Jagged and Zena Antilles, who has now willfully initiated the use of lethal force against the authorized enforcers of galactic law.

I didn't actually kill any of the Imperials, but if any of my shots had been more accurate that's exactly what could have happened. The intent was there, regardless of if I'd hit a ship or not. As it was, I think it surprised them for a second, and that tiny distraction was all I needed to blast *Solstice* out of there. The Imperial ships chased me and fired at me, but I managed to evade them long enough to make a quick jump into hyperspace.

It was crazy. It was insane. And once I stopped being utterly terrified, I realized I'd kind of enjoyed it. I don't know if that makes me a bad person or not...I'm still working on that. But something about extreme flying like that makes me feel exhilarated. It always has.

I figured *Solstice's* identity would be flagged after that incident, so en route to Denon I switched to the emergency backup IFF that Booster helped me install when I started doing more

smuggling, and I dug out the fake matching documentation and records. I'm not sure what to do about this long-term yet– it could be a problem. Then I tried to strengthen the sensor shielding in the smuggling compartments.

I delivered the cargo on Denon without any issues– that planet is big enough and busy enough to blend in with the crowd pretty easily– and the rest of the cargo shipments went fine. Kellarkai was happy with my results, and I was pleased about that. Even Quiet Guy told me I did a good job. I nearly fainted.

## Entry 24

I don't know where to start.

It's been a crazy time of things lately. I suppose it's best to begin at the beginning.

I flew a pre-coordinated shipment in to G-N for Kellarkai. I was on time, but I couldn't contact her group once I cleared customs and began my descent to the surface. That had never happened before, and while it was somewhat concerning, at the time I figured it just meant they were busy and they felt I didn't need supervision to complete their delivery. I'd been doing enough of them lately that I knew the drill by now. I proceeded on course and landed like normal.

I loaded up the rented landspeeder and brought their cargo to the last hideout of theirs I knew about. When I pulled in, though, no one came to meet me. No one even came to see if I was a raiding Imperial that they needed to shoot. This concerned me a lot more. Kellarkai usually let me know when I reached orbit if they had moved locations, but until I could get in contact with them, I wouldn't be able to find them. And that was *if* they had moved. The other option—that something bad had happened to them—actually worried me quite a bit.

I got out of the landspeeder, grabbed my blaster and walked inside the building. Everything on the outside looked intact; it wasn't like the Imperials had blasted in.

The more rooms I moved through, the more concerned I got. All their computers and equipment were still there, and it was obvious they hadn't moved locations, at least not with any preplanning. I couldn't figure out where everyone was, and I was getting more and more anxious.

I first heard something when I got to the kitchen. It was a muffled squeak coming from inside the pantry, through a door that was ajar. When I stepped sideways to get a better look, I saw a large eyeball glinting in the shadows inside the pantry. The unexpected sight creeped me out enough that I backed up a couple steps pretty quickly, and then the eye blinked and the pantry door was tentatively pushed open.

The silver-skinned Mon Cal leaned cautiously out from his pantry hiding spot, clutching a huge kitchen knife in a large, webbed hand. He was shaking, and he slowly crawled out and stood, though he backed away from me until the pantry blocked his escape. He held the knife close to him for protection in the same kind of durasteel grip he'd used to hold the comm jammer.

"Need help," he managed. He sounded terrified.

It was the first time he'd ever spoken to me, and the first time he had gotten within five meters of me. Even with my increased presence with Kellarkai's group recently, the Mon Cal had still fled and hidden whenever I'd come.

I holstered my blaster—very slowly—and asked what he needed help with and where all the others were. It took a few minutes to get the fragmented details put together, but finally I got what he was trying to tell me. All the others had left on the big mission they'd been planning to sabotage one of the Imperial factories, and while they were gone the Mon Cal had been listening to some of the Imperial frequencies he had learned of while he'd been a slave. The information he'd heard over the comm frequencies convinced him that something had gone horribly wrong and Kellarkai's group was in a lot of trouble, but he hadn't known what to do or how to help.

The news scared me more than I thought it would. Immediately I asked where the factory was that they'd gone to and assured the Mon Cal that I'd go and try to help them.

The Mon Cal surprised me again by taking a deep breath and then announcing that he'd come with me to assist. Even though he was still shaking and didn't exactly seem too keen on the

idea of leaving the safety of the rebels' building, I didn't argue or question him. I just beckoned him with me back to the landspeeder at a run. A few seconds later I heard him following.

We both jumped in the landspeeder, and I got us back to *Solstice* in record time. While I powered up the engines, the Mon Cal entered our destination into the navcomp with an ease and proficiency that caught me off-guard for a moment. We launched and sped off toward the designated factory.

On the way there the Mon Cal punched up the Imperial frequencies he'd been listening to, and even I could tell that things were bad. There were lots of transmissions, all of them indicating that there was major trouble that the Imperials were responding to with both haste and firepower. Something about the names and the specific location they were focusing on must have been familiar to the Mon Cal, since he told me exactly what building to go to once we reached the factory and how best to approach it. He even pulled up a map of that building's interior from the public Imperial database he accessed.

We were still thirty clicks out when the smoke became visible, billowing up to the sky from the factory. Our comm frequencies were overridden by an Imperial ordering us out of the area or they'd force us down, but I ignored it. I was focusing instead on the building ahead that the Mon Cal was pointing insistently to, the one that was going up in flames.

An Imperial assault shuttle was flying toward the end of the building that was not yet ablaze, and the Mon Cal made a strangled squeaking noise in his throat. When I asked what was wrong, he said Kellarkai's group would have to go that way to escape the fire, and it was quite plain they'd be going straight into the Imperial forces waiting for them there.

The assault shuttle turned and fired at us, but I evaded it and returned fire. I thought if I could keep that ship busy, maybe the others could get past them. But on my first pass over the area at that end of the building, I saw there were already many Imperial land vehicles and troops waiting and even spilling into the doorways. Kellarkai's group was going to get overrun sooner rather than later.

While still messing with the assault shuttle, I pointed to the comm and told the Mon Cal to try to contact Kellarkai's group. When they finally responded, I recognized Lightsaber's voice. She didn't seem to have expected us, which I can't blame her for, but once she was satisfied it was us and not a trick, she got down to business. She said they were retreating from a blaster fight in the corridors, caught between a horde of Imperials on one end and a growing inferno on the other with nowhere to go.

I asked Lightsaber and the Mon Cal to pinpoint their location on the map of the building as closely as they could while I held off the assault shuttle. At last he pointed to the spot where he thought they were, and he also quickly indicated where Lightsaber said the Imperial line was and the edge of the fire. Sure enough, they were sandwiched in. I did a quick comparison in my head to match up the spots on the exterior of the building I was flying over and the interior locations on the map, then I gritted my teeth and pointed to the spot where I'd pick up the group. I told the Mon Cal to relay it to Lightsaber. I swear the Mon Cal went stark white, but after I told him—rather bluntly—that I was sure, he did as I asked. Truth is, I wasn't too crazy about it either, but it was the only place where neither the Imperial ground forces nor the assault shuttle would bother us: just within the edge of the fire in the building and concealed by the smoke outside.

I got to work before I could think too much about what I'd decided to do. I called up all my navigation instruments on the heads-up display and flew *Solstice* directly into the thick, choking smoke. Instantly it was pitch black all around except for a hazy orange glow beneath us.

The thermal updrafts jostled us right and left, but that helped get us out of the way of a few final laser blasts from the assault shuttle. They didn't follow us in, and I imagine our thermal signature was drowned out pretty quickly.

I focused on the heads-up display and pointed *Solstice*'s nose directly at the rendezvous point. Now the flames were licking our shields and making it uncomfortably warm inside even with the environmental system coolant kicking into overdrive. From the sensors' erratic readings it looked like part of the building's wall was still intact where we were going, but a couple laser shots changed that. Now there was a huge hole in the ceiling and side wall, and the flames leaped up into the fresh oxygen.

I swung *Solstice* around on repulsors in that gap, lowered her as close to the ground as I could, and backed her up into the building. I felt her smashing through walls as we went until I stopped at the point where I hoped her aft cargo bay ramp would extend past the flames far enough for Kellarkai's group to get in. I hit the button to open the aft ramp.

A rush of sweltering heat and smoke immediately swept inside *Solstice*. Now everything around us was flickering orange, painfully bright. Shipboard alarms were going off left and right, warning of overheating systems, contaminated air, dropping O2 levels, and failing shields and hull integrity. Sweat poured down my back, and I started coughing so hard I could hardly dig out the emergency O2 breather masks for myself and the Mon Cal. Even when I could breathe again, I could hardly see through the stinging in my eyes. Without being asked, the Mon Cal helped me troubleshoot systems as well as we could, but all the electronics were overheating and fizzling out. I wondered how long we could stay, how long *Solstice* could hold out, and if we'd already passed that point without my realizing it and I had just doomed myself and the Mon Cal to die surrounded by fire exactly like my parents.

Then I felt a hand gripping my shoulder tightly from behind. Turning around a bit in my seat I saw Kellarkai. She was coughing too much to speak, but she waved her other hand forward insistently. I was only too happy to get out of there, and I hit the button to close the aft door, gunned *Solstice*'s engines, and took off as fast as my poor battered ship could take us.

We got a huge jump on the Imperial assault shuttle. I guess they thought once we went into the fire that we crashed or were otherwise done for. By the time they realized we were flying away, we were pretty far ahead. They pursued us for a bit— I'm sure our thermal signature was pretty apparent— but I was able to blend in with regular civilian traffic in the nearest large city, and with the Mon Cal's help we eventually lost them. Then I just concentrated on getting as far away as possible. Kellarkai suggested going to the large expanses of grasslands a couple continents over to land, regroup, and fix what we could on *Solstice*. Flying without any instruments or readouts isn't the easiest thing in the galaxy.

Once Kellarkai saw we were out of immediate danger from the Imperials, she climbed to her feet with difficulty, still coughing deeply, and tightly hugged my neck with one arm before turning to walk back to the cargo hold. Looking like he wasn't sure whether he wanted to laugh in relief or throw up, the Mon Cal followed at once and assisted her.

I could understand the Mon Cal's dilemma, because I felt the exact same way. I chose to start laughing though. That incredible relief wasn't just because I'd somehow made it out of there alive either.

A few minutes later Lightsaber came up to the cockpit. She was bleeding and a little singed but otherwise looked okay. First she thanked me for saving them (all of them got out alive, I was very happy to hear) and said if I'd done anything else or taken five minutes longer,

they'd all be dead or captured by now. Then she told me I was crazy and that I easily could have gotten myself killed trying to save them.

And the thing of it is, I knew that. I knew that going in. And I went anyway. Because it meant a lot to me to make sure they were safe and alive. Even if I didn't even know some of the beings who were crowded into my little ship, it was that important to me that I did what I could to help them and protect them.

That made me think about what Dad and Mom did back on Gus Treta. About why they did it.

I think I get it now.

Then Lightsaber told me something I didn't expect: that the Alliance to Restore the Republic had put out an open call for starfighter pilots, and anyone who was insane enough to fly a freighter the way I just had would probably fit in well in the starfighter corps. Either she or Kellarkai could point me in the right direction and help me get in if that was something I wanted to do.

I thought about it pretty hard, and the prospect was pretty tempting. What finally pushed me into deciding to go for it was *Solstice*. Sitting in that fire had eaten her up pretty badly, and she was barely spaceworthy anymore. The hull was blistered and most of the electronics were completely fried. The amount of repairs she'd need was staggering and not something I could come close to affording. Kellarkai said the Alliance could take her and fix her up enough to fly cargo for them, even if only in atmo. Between all of that it seemed like a good, appropriate time to close that chapter of my life. I was a bit sad, especially after I'd clung to *Solstice* so hard as a final connection to my parents and what they gave me, but this feels right, and I think it'll be okay to let go of her. They gave me a lot more than credits for a ship.

Once I'm in the Alliance I think I'll have to stop writing journal entries for security reasons, but I want to hang on to these entries and not delete them. That way, so I tell myself, when I'm a galaxy-famous starfighter pilot and I decide to write my memoirs, I'll have a ready record and reference of this time in my life. Hey... memoirs. That'd be fun. I should start thinking of titles. "Fighting Stars"? "Ace in the Hole"? "Target Locked"? I'll come up with something.

Well, this isn't where that architect-wannabe boy on Gus Treta expected to end up, but I've got to say that I'm excited to see where this path is going to go.

Ace Starfighter Pilot— no, *Rebel* Ace Starfighter Pilot Wedge Antilles.

I like the sound of that.

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*The End*

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