

The Regis Dilemma

A Novel Based on the *Star Wars* Saga

by

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Chapter 1

Stars on all sides and only the company of two fellow pilots, Luke Skywalker wearied of this patrol. Imperial forces had vanished from the Sarcon system - not even a TIE fighter had been sighted in weeks. Still, duty was duty, and the quest for the freedom of the galaxy could escalate into battle at a moment's notice.

The X-wing squadron commander slumped in the cockpit seat, listening to his navigation 'droid R2-D2 whistle and hum in a language entirely its own. In many ways, Luke felt relieved things remained quiet. He had experienced no stirring in the Force, an indication Darth Vader might have been in close proximity. Luke's encounters with the Dark Lord of the Sith had already cost him a hand, as well as numerous friends in the Rebellion.

"One more pass before we head to base?" crackled Keena Fairchild's melodious soprano over the transmitter.

"Sounds good to me," replied Farnok Gill, the group's third member. "I'm starved."

Luke chuckled. "You're always starved, Farnok. One more pass."

As the trio circled swampy Jemeier, the farthest point on their run, Luke recalled time spent on a similar planet, when Jedi Master Yoda taught him the wisdom of the Force. He cringed at the thought of snakes, hip deep water and treacherous obstacles. "It's a good thing Jemeier is uninhabited."

Then, he noticed a feeble blip, repeating, on his scopes.

Gill yelped, "Did you see that?"

"It's just an echo," Luke retorted.

"I don't think so," offered Keena. "The pattern resembles an old-style distress signal."

"You're dreaming," Gill said.

"I am not. Remember General Rieekan's lecture on the communication systems used during the Clone Wars? Their distress signal was three short pulses and one long."

Luke monitored his scopes. "Keena, I think you're right."

"Oh, no," protested Farnok. "I was so looking forward to a big meal..."

"You two head for Sarcon Six," Luke decided. "I'll check this out and meet you by nightfall."

Despite their expressions of concern, Luke's X-wing dove toward the planet surface. His comrades orbited twice before veering into deep space.

Suspecting a downed freighter or transport, he tried to hail the survivors as the fighter cut through an atmosphere dense with mist and fog. “Blue leader to stranded craft on Jemeier. Do you copy?”

No response. If he could establish communication, he might not have to venture into the swamps. It would be so much easier to relay a message for help to a neighboring outpost.

“Blue leader to stranded craft on Jemeier. Please identify.”

“Wi’ an ugly reptile sitting on m’supplies, ye expect trivial conversation?” spouted a frustrated female voice. A pause, and a change in tone. “Oy, who’s that?”

Luke declared, “Your signal is weak, but I copy. Identify yourself.”

“M’name is Marca Regis. I’m stuck in here...”

“I’d like to help, but my scopes show no level ground near your coordinates.”

“Well, can ye find someone braver?” she scoffed. “This reptile is hungry, and so am I.”

Luke groaned in resignation. Plunging through the haze, contrasting theories clashed in his brain. What was one girl doing alone in this place? he puzzled. How will I get her off the planet, if I do find a safe site to land?

The latter problem was resolved first. Emerging from a cloud at 100 meters, Luke spied an overgrown pasture a short distance beyond the vine-encrusted module. The knoll appeared solid, but one could never tell. Engines slowed, landing gear snapped into place, and the X-wing settled atop lush grasses.

The canopy popped open; the fighter jolted sideways. Artoo-Detoo squealed.

“It’s all right, Artoo,” Luke soothed the silver and blue ‘droid, shaking his blond head free of his helmet. “There’s no way you’ll sink before I get back.”

From its perch behind the cockpit, Artoo whined.

Luke jumped onto the mushy soil and pondered his boots. Would they survive this mercy mission? Would he?

Dual suns filtered through moist air barely lit his way toward swampier terrain. Gloom and uncertainty were augmented by shadows of misshapen trees.

With each step, Luke grew more reluctant.

Something drove him onward, however. Something he could not resist. A stirring in the Force - not the harbinger of impending danger Vader’s presence caused, but almost a sensation of triumph - speeded him through thorn-tipped brush and brackish water.

He found a sphere twice the size of R2-D2 partially sunk in the bog. Dents and scratches indicated it had bounced through at least one asteroid belt en route to this final resting place. Closer inspection revealed the hatch had been damaged so even manual override would not dislodge it. Luke's sole alternative - blasting a hole in the hull - put the life of its occupant at risk.

Luke pounded on the orb. "Marca Regis!"

"Who's that?" faintly penetrated deformed metal.

"If you can move, get away from the hatch. I've got to force it."

He drew his blaster from its holster and took careful aim. A second after pulling the trigger, smoke dissipated to display a perfectly round opening. So perfect, in fact, the blaster could not have made it.

Luke had no time to worry about this oddity, though. Loud coughing from inside claimed his attention. He peered through the gap at a thoroughly drenched female.

"Are you hurt?"

She spat, "By the Spirit, I've got a mouth full of slush."

"You're Marca Regis?"

"Yes." She tried in vain to rise. "I can't..."

Luke's strong hand extended to grasp hers. After a few clumsy attempts, Marca burst from her confinement. When her sandaled feet contacted the marshy ground, knees failed and she plopped in the muck.

Luke clutched her at the waist. "Will you be able to walk?"

"Wi' ye to help, I should. Cramped in that contraption, I couldn't stretch m'self. I need to find m'land legs."

Skywalker laughed. Marca glared, and he commented, "I've never heard such a unique dialect. Where are you from?"

"Shin-mara."

"What system is that?"

"System?" A fresh wave of coughing shook her tiny frame.

"Is something wrong?"

Marca licked her lips. "Have ye a skin handy?"

"A skin?"

"Drink, man. Can't ye comprehend standard Maran?"

Luke chuckled anew. He offered her his canteen; she slurped the liquid so fast most of it dribbled down her chin.

Sated, she wiped her mouth on the sleeve of a voluminous garment. It resembled a sheet wrapped across her shoulders, touching her ankles and secured

by a knotted cord. Red piping accented the hem. A gold medallion hung from a braided chain around her neck.

“Does everyone on - what did you call it, ‘Shin-mara’? Does everyone on Shin-mara wear such clothes?” Luke queried.

“Only the Councillors of the High Spirit and their families. Farmers and laborers weave their own work robes.”

“How did you get here?”

“I know not. M’father and I were kidnaped by the Faithless. We were being transported to their colony when m’father managed to loose his bonds and forced me into this contrivance. I don’t know how long I’ve been inside it.”

“From the look of you, quite awhile.”

“Had I known ‘twas not m’time, I would have feared for m’life.” Marca succumbed to yet another coughing fit.

“We’d better get moving. You’ll be needing medical care, and the nearest inhabited planet is halfway across the quadrant.”

The pair commenced a hazardous excursion; Marca’s toes sank in the mire, and she mumbled to herself.

“Is anything wrong?” Luke wondered.

“I have never seen the likes of your raiment. From whence do ye hail?”

“I’m a pilot.” A noncommittal reply would protect him against potential subterfuge. He still sensed a trembling in the Force, and if Vader were somehow involved...

“What is a pilot?”

Skywalker stopped and stared at the demure creature. “You can’t tell me you don’t know...”

“I assure ye, the cut of your garb and most of your words are utterly unknown. Enlighten me, please.”

Luke fumbled with his orange jumpsuit and harness. “I fly patrols in a fighter.”

“Fly?” Horror accompanied a slender digit thrust skyward. “Beyond the planet’s surface?”

Luke nodded.

“Faithless!” A frightened Marca turned to flee, but tripped on a gnarled tree root and flopped into a murky puddle.

Luke raised her onto a rock outcropping. “Whatever you mean by faithless doesn’t concern me. What’s most important is getting out of here. Come on.”

As they progressed, Marca recovered strength in her limbs. Soon the pair trotted between clumps of twisted foliage.

The sleek X-wing awaited them in the clearing. Marca gawked at the splendid craft, resisting when Luke urged her toward it.

“It’s much safer than that pod, Marca,” he affirmed.

With his assistance, she mounted the ladder into the cockpit. He inspected the fuselage, then joined her.

When the transparent canopy descended, Marca discovered less space than in her prior accommodations. The converters engaged; in a heartbeat they soared above the trees to be enveloped by blinding grey vapor.

“Sorry about the limited seating,” Luke apologized. The words were distorted by his flight helmet.

A series of sharp beeps interrupted him, and Marca glanced over her shoulder.

“That’s R2-D2,” announced Skywalker. “He’s a ‘droid designed to perform about a thousand functions, including co-piloting this X-wing. He just said hello.”

“‘Droid?’” Marca gasped.

“Are you prehistoric on Shin-mara? Everyone knows what ‘droids are.”

“Just because ye saved m’life don’t give ye cause to insult me.”

“I’m taking you to an outpost on Kinchenon. You can get food and supplies there. With any luck, the Empire didn’t track you through the system.”

“Empire?”

“To explain the tyranny of the Empire would take a lifetime,” Luke stated. “Suffice it to say, if you see any stormtroopers, avoid them.”

“What are stormtroopers?”

He shrugged. “When we get to the capital city - Issle Tork - I’ll show you.” He surveyed her tousled brown curls, smudged face and hands. “You’ll be safe, once you’ve cleaned up.”

“How do ye expect me to survive? I know not the customs or the dialect. And currency...”

“I’ll give you enough money to last until you find work.” The girl opened her mouth, but Luke’s warning finger mandated silence. “We’re within range of Kinchenon. I’ll answer your other questions later.”

“Anything ye say, Your Worship,” agreed Marca.

Chapter 2

The X-wing careened toward a world shining green, purple and gold, lit by an insignificant reddish sun. Marca clung so tightly to Luke's neck, he almost suffocated. He'd grown up amidst the Empire's technology; he couldn't imagine her fear at the intricacies of space travel.

The craft leveled off and approached a metropolis rising above field and forest. Luke struggled to hold the controls steady while Marca gripped his arm. She did not release him until they cruised into a gigantic domed hangar occupied by a countless array of ships.

The smooth touchdown brought a prayer from her lips. The canopy shifted on its hinges, allowing fresh air to fill their lungs. Luke tossed his helmet into a storage bin and leapt from the fighter. Marca moved, but he waved her back onto the seat. "Wait for me. I won't be long." He crossed the immense stone floor and disappeared into a darkened passageway.

What a mess! he mused. His chronometer indicated he should have returned to Sarcon VI three hours ago. His comrades would be worried, as would those in command, who knew of his unwilling link to Darth Vader.

Far simpler to deliver the girl to the Rebel base, yet a persistent gnawing at the base of his skull advised caution with this unknown quantity.

Jarred from his reverie, he beheld a street overrun with stormtroopers. On his last visit to the planet, no more than one detachment had maintained order. Why the build-up? he ruminated. Skywalker realized his own danger wearing the orange Rebel pilot's attire. He hurried along the busy thoroughfare and slipped into a shop owned by a trusted Alliance sympathizer.

Five minutes later, Luke had transacted his business and scrambled to the docking bay, a parcel under one arm. At the end of the passage, he halted in the shadows and watched with tingling nerves the confrontation unfolding before him.

Marca Regis stood beside the X-wing, facing two white-armored stormtroopers, weapons poised. She touched her gold medallion and extended her left hand in salutation. "Peace of the Spirit, m'friends. Would ye know where I might find the soul in charge?"

"Who wants to know?" one guard barked.

She feigned dizziness. "I been lost in the desert for ages. No food or drink..."

The other guard thrust his weapon forward. "There are no deserts on Kinchenon."

Luke decided prolonging the conflict increased their peril. He used his blaster to silence the pair. As their bodies clanked to the floor, Marca shuddered with revulsion. Skywalker embraced her.

“Why... did you kill them?”

“I couldn’t let them report to their superiors,” he replied. “What happened?”

Breathing hard, she recounted how a man in green uniform had entered the hangar and inspected the fighter. Upon leaving, he ordered the guards to arrest anyone who tried to board the ship. Because she knew Luke would rejoin her, she acted on instinct.

“I appreciate it.” Luke passed her the bundle. “I brought you some clothes, and here are 200 credits to keep you until I can send help. With the Empire massing troops here, I can’t say when that will be.” He strode toward the X-wing. “Be careful. Keep your eyes open. Blend in as much as possible; they’ll be after you now.”

Before Marca could protest, engines revved, and the ship floated into the pastel afternoon sky. Cursing her misfortune, she whirled on a dozen white-armored soldiers rushing the complex. She hugged the package Luke had given her and scanned the surroundings for a hiding place.

The stormtroopers fired at the outbound craft. Marca ducked into a recessed doorway. She thanked the Spirit she was not obese.

A booming voice brought a stop to the barrage. “He is out of range. By the time the Alliance knows of our plans, we will be ready for their attack. There is something he left behind - and I charge you, Captain Biard, to find her.”

Marca, pressed against the cold metal bulkhead, did not see the entire contingent spin toward a black-clad giant. “Her?” muttered the confused officer.

Twilight fell on the planet’s capital, bringing peace to Marca’s heart. She’d been studying activity in the bay, not so much befuddled as awed. Finally, she had settled in a meditative posture to assimilate these phenomena.

The high-domed docking bay could house a moderate-sized Maran village. At present, however, the primary occupant was a monstrous, elliptical creation of metal and wires. It had landed shortly after Luke’s departure, trapping her.

Eight or nine men in blue jumpsuits and caps milled about, affecting repairs. Another group rode into the dock on a hovering craft some time later.

They filed up a ramp and reappeared, lugging enormous crates.

Marca reasoned joining the crew might be her sole means of escape.

Hugging the wall, she changed into the jumpsuit Skywalker had purchased - baggy enough to conceal her feminine attributes. She tucked brunette curls beneath a soft cap and hid most of her oval face behind a pair of goggles. The remnants of her robe wiped mud stains from her cheeks. She squeezed her feet into tight boots and pitched her sandals in the corner. A loving caress of her pendant preceded the trek across the slab floor. This would be her inaugural lesson in extraterrestrial civilization.

Huge cases were being transferred from the cargo ship to the wheelless vehicle, which cruised down the passage at regular intervals, disposed of its load and returned. Marca evaluated the routine.

“Hey, you!” someone shouted.

Marca turned. A bald, flatulent man, who seemed to be supervising operations, signaled her from the ramp. She trod toward him.

“You’re gettin’ paid to work, not daydream,” he snapped. “They need help with the last load.”

Marca jogged aboard, stopping at a fork in the corridor.

“Well?” The foreman had followed her, and shoved her toward the right. “You must be new.”

“Yes, sir,” Marca bluffed in the lowest range she could coax from her throat.

“What’s your name?”

“Er... Mark Regis, sir.”

“Ever been on a freighter before, Regis?”

“No, sir.” That was the truth.

“Someday, I’ll give you a tour of this one. All you need to know now is that the cargo hold is down there on the left.”

The man withdrew, leaving Marca to her own devices. She dodged a few lanky youths hauling large crates; when she located the hold, she grabbed a rectangular carton that weighed more than she did and filed out the door.

“That’s it,” the crew was informed after the transport craft hummed away. Laborers dispersed in small groups behind it. Goggles shoved above the bill of her cap, Marca paused, considering her egress.

“Regis, be sure you’re at Bay 27 tomorrow by 0500. We have to reload everything off this heap on Lord Vader’s Star Destroyer after the inventory paperwork is finished. That kind of overtime will rate us a bonus this week. How ‘bout a drink?”

Marca fell into step with the foreman, glad to leave the docking bay unchallenged. Their eyes had no more adjusted to the tunnel's dimness than they reached a bustling concourse leading into the city.

Renewed incredulity swept Marca's soul. Shin-mara had been row after row of wood or brick dwellings, no more than two stories high. She gawked at towering, windowless facades. To stand atop such a behemoth would be the ultimate torture.

"You haven't been in Issle Tork long, Regis. Where's your home?"

"The hill country," Marca lied. "M'family was killed by marauders..."

She forced tears from violet eyes, feigning grief. The man patted her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Have you lodgings?"

"No, sir."

"Forget the 'sir' garbage. I'm Gershon Olial, and my friends call me Gersh. How old are you, boy?"

"Seventeen, sir."

"Gersh, boy. How 'bout doublin' up at my digs? I got plenty of room."

Olial preceded Marca into a noisy cantina, on the fringe of a lavish shopping district. She noticed her escort had begun to limp.

"Gersh, are ye all right?"

"Yea. Why?"

She mentioned the infirmity, and he guaranteed to satisfy her curiosity once seated.

A mug of ale for both dock hands rested on a wobbly oval table in the midst of a raucous crowd. Olial gulped the brew, while Marca contemplated the ingredients of the bubbling froth.

"Drink up, Regis," urged the foreman. "Or aren't you the drinkin' type?"

"I never..." she admitted.

"Well, you'll acquire a taste for it. Everybody who slaves for Lord Vader needs a good drunk at the end of a 14-hour shift. You'd think we were convicts on Diarondo."

"For the second time, ye have mentioned that name. Who is this Lord Vader?"

Olial's bushy eyebrows arched. "You mean, you don't *know*?"

Marca shook her head.

"How far in the hills you been hidin', boy? Lord Vader is the prime cause of every heartache that's come to Kinchenon. He's the reason I limp when I'm

tired. Our first meeting, I refused to bow and, in a tick, he buckled both my knees and drove my nose into the dirt. I haven't been so bold since, but he reminds me of it every so often."

"By the Spirit!" Marca swore.

"I bet you the next round of drinks he harasses me tomorrow while we're loadin' his ship."

"Is he so heartless?"

Oliat took a swallow of ale and wiped the foam from his pudgy lips. "He leaves the menial laborers alone, right enough; it's his officers and fellas like us foremen he torments. You don't need to worry, Regis; Vader kills so many of us, sooner or later you'll be in my shoes. My advice is to do as he says and dispute nothing."

"Ye poor soul," she whispered. "I can help ye..."

"No, boy, no. If you get involved, you won't live to see your next harvest."

Marca slouched on the decrepit chair. What need was there in Issle Tork for this reign of terror? She would've loved to demand Vader's accounting for his violation of the Nonviolence Pact.

Oliat shattered her musings. "Let's go," he grumbled, rising. He had drained her mug in addition to his own, threw a coin on the table and tugged Marca to a side door.

"What's the hurry?" she panted, having difficulty keeping pace.

"Are you sure you're not wanted by the 'troopers for any reason?"

"I don't think so."

Oliat scowled. "Maybe you'd better find your own place to stay tonight. There're rooms vacant in the Old City - that is, if you don't mind Rolts for neighbors."

"Rolts?"

"Don't you know nothin'? They're akin to sloppy green Wookiees. Harmless, really, but they live out there because the Empire don't want 'em around. A room there won't cost much. How 'bout it?"

Marca acquiesced. "If 'tis best."

"By the look of those 'troopers who were givin' us the once-over, I do. One of us may be dead by mornin'."

Gershon Oliat steered Marca into a deserted cul-de-sac of seven unoccupied shanties. She was left in a clapboard hovel furnished with a straw bed and two rickety chairs. A shaft of light shone from the fractured ceiling. It nauseated the foreman, but reminded Marca of Shin-mara. She preferred it to the hulking obelisks dwarfing the cantina.

“I’m sorry ‘bout this, Regis, but don’t expect any more favors from me. Good night.”

“Good night... sir.”

A grunt reached her ears as he departed. The warped door no longer fit its frame; no glass blocked warm breezes from whistling through the windows. Not ideal for those desiring privacy; however, Marca’s sole priority was sleep.

Chapter 3

“How long does it take to investigate an automatic distress beacon from an abandoned freighter?” fumed Princess Leia Organa. “We’ve had a special patrol searching twelve hours for you!”

“Calm down, Your Highness,” General Rieekan advised. “Give Luke a chance to speak.”

Straddling a stool in the Rebel command center on Sarcon VI, Luke related how he rescued Marca Regis, their stop on the planet Kinchenon, and his discovery of Imperial troops there. “As soon as you’ll let me, I’m going back to get Marca, because she’s in real danger,” he concluded.

“What makes you say that?” queried Leia.

“I felt an odd stirring in the Force near her. If Vader perceives it, too...”

Rieekan asked, “Are you saying she has the Force?”

“I believe she does. But wherever she came from, it’s so primitive, she knows nothing about it.”

“You’re fatigued, and delirious,” Leia remarked. “You’d better get some rest. It’s almost dawn.”

Luke glowered at the strong-willed Princess. He didn’t like when she doubted him, yet how could she understand? He rose and stomped toward the passage.

A sickly brown twilight shrouded Issle Tork when Marca awoke. Gazing at the stars, she found them arranged in similar configurations to those seen at home. She calculated it to be 0430 - on Shin-mara, they didn’t have mechanical chronometers. They learned as youngsters to tell time by the heavens.

She decided it would be unwise to carry Luke’s money while she worked, so she secreted the pouch on the closet shelf. Tightening the utility belt around her crushed blue jumpsuit, she grabbed her cap and goggles before venturing forth.

The streets of Old Issle Tork recalled childhood days. Of a higher class than her schoolmates, she seldom was invited into the dwarfish domiciles, but often eavesdropped on council sessions when inhabitants complained for lack of basic necessities. Did every village have its poor, mistreated souls?

Breakfast at the dock office amounted to a tumbler of bitter ale and doughy biscuits. “Barely gets you going, eh?” grouched one worker, noticing Marca’s grimace.

“What I wouldn’t give for a bowl of fruit and a jug of wine,” she lamented.

Oliat overheard her. "No time for daydreaming," he snarled. "Lord Vader wants his Destroyer fully stocked in two hours. We'll earn our wages today."

Two dozen laborers paraded to Bay 27, where rows of cargo waited to be loaded into an ovoid transport, larger than the freighter from which it had been removed the previous day. How do these things get off the ground? Marca debated.

The process dragged from the start. Two men were required to tote each crate. When a rakish youth approached Marca's stack, she eyed him quizzically.

"'Tis anything wrong?" she inquired.

"No, Regis. Grab your end and let's go."

Marca raised a case on her own. "Thanks, anyway, m'friend."

The whole crew gaped as she climbed the ramp. On the hangar's observation deck, a tall figure cloaked in black also witnessed the feat. He knew it wasn't Skywalker, but who else embodied such an abundance of the Force?

"Lord Vader," came a monotone drawl.

"Yes, Captain."

"We've received word the provisions will not be aboard the Star Destroyer until 0900, sir."

"It is taking too long, Captain. I shall leave as scheduled, and if the task is not complete, someone will pay." That evil breathmask swivelled toward the officer, sending a rush of fear up his spine. He scurried from the room; Gershon Oliat would be held responsible if Vader was delayed.

Emerging from the ship, Marca noticed a hushed conversation between the Imperial captain and the foreman. She saw Oliat's ruddy face blanch - more trouble?

She drew him aside after the officer exited the bay. "Can I do anything, sir?"

"Can you make men walk faster? Or haul heavier loads? No, Regis. I'm doomed."

Perplexed, Marca traversed the deck to three banded cartons. She tested one - not too heavy. She hoisted the trio and retraced her path into the transport's bowels. In less than an hour, the cargo had been secured.

The crew boarded the ship and ascended through Kinchenon's atmosphere.

Out the porthole, Marca swore she saw the red sun reflected off a city in the stars.

"What's that?" she whispered to a tanned dockhand beside her.

"That's his lordship's Star Destroyer."

Marca found no words to describe the vessel to her muddled brain. A triangular wedge of such overwhelming depth and breadth, it could totally eclipse any smaller planet. Lights through myriad windows twinkled like stars themselves.

When the group disembarked in a hold equal in size to the entire Issle Tork hangar complex, Gershon Olial gathered them together.

“We’ve got 20 minutes left to offload. I don’t want to sound pessimistic, but I won’t face Lord Vader alone if we fail.”

Point made, his men responded. All efforts would have been in vain, nonetheless, had not Marca risen to the occasion. She unloaded her quota, then assisted the others.

Olial’s chronometer read 0655. The last spare parts had just been stacked in place. His neck was saved.

Darth Vader sauntered into the hold, boots creating a military rhythm on the deck. The sweat-soaked foreman bowed as low as his rotundity warranted. Words hissed through the breathmask, “You were fortunate, Olial, to have a miracle worker on your crew today. Next time, you may not be so lucky.”

Marca had wandered beneath the transport’s aft section, examining intricate mechanisms built into the hull. Her concentration broke, though, when she heard Gershon Olial shriek: Vader, she surmised.

What a pitiful spectacle. A creature in black from head to foot extended a gloved hand over his cowering subject. Marca’s anger flared as Olial’s nose neared the floor, propelled by powers unseen. How could the others stand by and do nothing? She plucked a hexagonal fitting from a tool rack and, taking aim, lobbed it at that demon’s head.

Vader flew fifteen meters and slammed against the bulkhead. Six stormtroopers ran to assist him, while another pair edged under the freighter to apprehend Marca.

A young officer in green ordered dock personnel aboard their ship. He realized witnesses to such an incident could spread inconvenient rumors. Olial had his legs again, restrained by two guards. Marca stood at his left, thick metal binders encircling her skinny wrists.

The Sith Lord was escorted toward these prisoners. What manner of alien exists behind that mangled helmet? speculated Marca. Molded into the black mask, a peculiar face loomed above her, its humanity ambiguous. Ominous wheezing vibrated a bizarre triangular mouthpiece. What does it see through those opaque lenses?

“Olial, your miracle worker has a bad temper,” Vader snapped. “You should have trained him to have more respect for those in authority.”

“But, Your Lordship, he joined our crew only yesterday...”

“Excuses won’t save you this time.” The left glove twitched; the foreman hiccupped.

Gershon Olial crashed to the deck amidst the sound of cracking bones. Fleishy hands clutched at his throat, wrestling an invisible vice compressing his windpipe. A blue tinge transfigured his visage...

Marca bent to him. “By the High Spirit!” she prayed, fingers rubbing her medallion. When she touched his trembling shoulder, Olial squinted at her. He managed a deep breath, smiled with crooked teeth.

Vader recoiled, as did his cohort. Then, the dark fiend’s astonishment escalated to rage. “I will not waste time playing infantile games. Release Olial, but keep the miracle worker aboard.”

Pausing on the transport’s ramp to steal a last glimpse, Gershon Olial’s green eyes betrayed wonder and gratitude. Marca grinned and nodded in acknowledgment.

Stormtroopers ushered the diminutive brunette through a maze of corridors to the Star Destroyer’s heart. She was confined in a tiny cubicle after one of the armored monstrosities divulged the Dark Lord would summon her as soon as the ship went into hyperspace.

“Hyper-what?”

But the door had slid shut.

Marca relaxed on a smooth slab. The cell’s decor left nothing to the imagination: white metallic walls and a grid ceiling through which shone artificial light. While the craft veered away from Kinchenon, she freed her hands of their bonds. The door whisked aside at her touch - were they so foolish, they forgot to lock it?

The passage was deserted. She skulked through the shadows, prayers on her lips. More than anything, she wanted a peek at the controls of this colossus, despite not knowing their location.

A sudden burst of speed knocked her off balance. She rolled along the deck, banging her head against the bulkhead. When her arm jammed between two closing doors, she was unable to rise until a sensor retracted them into the wall.

Sharp pains shot through her torso. A broken rib? She remained prone a moment, scanning her surroundings - obviously an officer’s quarters. Green uniforms lay on the bed, and Marca recalled Luke’s words, “Blend in...” She would be less conspicuous if she discarded the jumpsuit.

The trousers and matching shirt-coat fit loosely, but would suffice. Seven pair of red and blue insignia on the chest impressed her. She adjusted a soft billed

cap atop her tangled mop, slid her pendant beneath the buttons and stuffed the cast-offs in a drawer.

With a contented sigh, she resumed her exploration. She meandered in no particular direction, not flinching when other officers saluted in passing. Ahead, a lift deposited five men in the corridor. Another boarded, calling to her, "Are you going to the bridge, sir?"

"Yes, please."

The young man held the conveyance. A shiver of excitement claimed Marca at the swift vertical motion. In an instant, the center of this ship's operations sprawled before her; the girl had never envisioned anything so fantastic.

She alighted from the car, greeted by a wave of salutes. She mimicked the gesture, moving away from where Darth Vader stood, perusing the stars through trapezoidal windows.

The collection of technological marvels astounded her. On the split deck, assorted consoles, scanners and weapon controls were manned by conscripts in stiff green uniforms similar to her own.

Leaning over a technician's shoulder, Marca monitored a TIE fighter's pursuit of another craft. "X-wing?" she offered.

"Unidentified, sir. It's Rebel, though."

Marca frowned. "A single ship can do little harm. Take no action unless so ordered."

"Yes, Admiral."

Marca choked at the title. On Shin-mara, there was one Admiral, and he oversaw the Council of the High Spirit. Turning, a group of officers beckoned her.

At least she knew what image she projected. "Gentlemen," she hailed.

"Admiral, we were discussing the practicality of rebuilding the capital of Belinwacs," expounded a pudgy, fair-skinned lieutenant. "If we're merely going to use the planet as an outpost to keep tabs on Rebel movements in the quadrant..."

"Soldiers need a place to eat and sleep, do they not?" Marca interspersed. "But I wouldn't sanction new construction, if the city's existing buildings are sound." She wanted to kick herself for traipsing into such a precarious situation, yet she could not safely reply otherwise. "Perhaps we will require the farmland there to grow crops," she added.

"Your counsel testifies to your wisdom, Admiral," came a baritone rumble beyond the circle. The men scattered to allow Darth Vader an unobstructed view of the "officer".

"Thank ye," Marca addressed her feet.

A disconcerting pause, then, “I will see you in my chambers immediately, Admiral.”

The Dark Lord stalked off the bridge, to the relief of all.

“I hope you aren’t in trouble, Toby,” muttered one of the men.

Marca did not reply. She could not forget the evilness of Vader’s black mask, those hidden eyes. He knew. Granted, the disguise was not perfect, but it had fooled his crew. She thanked the Spirit he hadn’t exposed her publicly.

“You’d better go, Toby.”

“Are you afraid, Admiral?” the fair-skinned lieutenant probed.

Violet orbs shone with pity. “Ye tell me, is there any sense in fearing the inevitable? Carry on.” Saluting, she ambled toward the lift.

She boarded with another young officer. As the door closed, she doubled over - the earlier abdominal injury. Her companion ignored the scene.

When the spasm diminished, she straightened to her full, unimpressive height. “If I must say, m’friend, the next time ye see one of your brethren in pain, ye better do everything possible to help.”

“But, sir, Lord Vader often punishes unworthies in such manner. We have been instructed to tend to our duties.”

“I’m countermanding that order. Sympathy from a crew member could fortify a soul against Vader’s tantrums. He is a tyrant and must not be humored.” The car slowed. “Remember what I said.”

In the passage, Marca wandered, contemplating options. Having transgressed against terms of the Nonviolence Pact by defending Gershon Olial, she was required to undergo Reparation. Vader, too, had violated the Pact, seemingly to a more critical extent. She caressed the medallion; there were too many unanswered questions.

A panel ahead slid open. Stepping inside, she discovered an octagonal room, the sole fixture a huge module on a platform. A weird glow radiated from the polished exterior. When she ran tentative digits along the edge, a violent blast of hydraulic pressure deafened her. The sphere’s jagged roof parted from its base.

Petrified, she dashed for the exit.

“Your power intrigues me, miracle worker.”

Marca reeled on the Dark Lord, enshrined within the globe.

Trapped!

“When you entered this room, my thoughts fogged,” Vader stated. “No mortal has ever disturbed me to such a degree. The Force is strong in you.”

“I know not to what ye refer.” She spread her arms. “But my mortality is plain to see. I’m not so sure about yours.”

“Life has taken its toll on my body, but I still claim humanity.”

“Then why do ye kill your brethren?”

“The Emperor requires certain standards be upheld. Those who do not fulfill their duties are eliminated. That is the law.”

“Laws can be changed.”

“The late Admiral Tobias voiced similar opinions...”

“The *late* Admiral?”

“Yes, though only you and I know of his demise. That is why I was not fooled by your presence on the bridge, as were the others.”

“So murder makes ye a better man,” scoffed Marca.

“Your tongue wields a mighty sting, miracle worker. If you do not practice caution, you may suffer for it.”

“I proclaim the truth as I see it. I will accept the consequences.”

Vader detached a short metal cylinder from his belt. “I will not tolerate insolence. You may be able to resist death in other forms, but a lightsaber is fatal to all.” A reddish beam shot from the handgrip, rather thick and of sword’s length.

He descended from the platform.

“Ye would ignore the tenets of the Nonviolence Pact and kill one unarmed?”

“You deserve no consideration after the turmoil you have wrought. Prepare to die.”

A smirk parted Marca’s thin lips as she reached out a trembling hand. Vader halted, confounded and incensed when the glowing laser was wrenched from his grasp and sailed across the room. The sight of this child’s uninjured skin brought a growl from his breathmask. He lunged for her throat.

Marca smelled burning circuitry as the Sith Lord shrank away in agony, his gloves charred to bare wires.

“Who are you, miracle worker?” he howled.

“A vassal of the High Spirit, m’friend.”

Saluting in Maran fashion, she crossed the threshold. Thought patterns that had penetrated her mind while in contact with the lightsaber’s blade baffled her. Darth Vader was suppressing years of emotional anguish. If she could but touch his soul...

“Ready to cut in sublight engines, Admiral,” a technician called.

“Carry on.” Marca had returned to the bridge. She reclined on the molded throne reserved for Vader’s use, legs dangling over the padded arm. Her tranquility consoled the crew. From the din of conversation around her, she

ingested valuable intelligence concerning every phase of the Star Destroyer's routine.

What purpose this interstellar destruction, the Empire subduing peoples of remote planets by force? What was their motive for the persecution of well-intentioned men: Admiral Tobias, Gershon Olial, and how many others? Vader's rationale enraged her; she could not stomach it. So long as she remained with the Imperial forces, she would continue to oppose this behavior.

On Shin-mara, though divided by classes, there was no discrimination or injustice among the people. Inspired by the High Spirit and the Nonviolence Pact, no man intentionally harmed another. Only the Faithless, a band of radicals pushing for scientific development, interfered with peace and order, ostracized to their own secluded colony.

Dropping from hyperspace in sight of the planet Belinwacs, Marca was stunned by its muted beauty. A golden sun provided heat and light. Captain Pilte, a swarthy executive, informed her Lord Vader expected her among the landing party assembling in the shuttle dock. Rising, the injury to her abdomen flared once more, and she sank on one knee.

"Give me your hand," she moaned.

Pilte hesitated.

"That's an order."

He clenched the petite appendage and supported her as she regained her strength. She discerned terror in his brown eyes.

"I promise ye all," she declared, "Darth Vader can do no harm unless ye fear him. Defend your actions, even if they are deemed mistakes. He could not harm me, so ye know m'words are true."

Vader and six stormtroopers waited beside a collapsible Y-wing shuttle, the craft being loaded with supplies. "Ah, Admiral," greeted the Dark Lord. He had replaced his gloves, and his breathmask had been repaired. "We shall be under way soon. I hope the primitive conditions do not offend you."

Marca caught the sarcasm and chuckled. "Shall we proceed, m'lord?"

Eight people boarded the ship. The Sith Lord shuffled to and fro during the journey, hands beneath his cape. Marca's heart raced as they encountered mild atmospheric turbulence. She prayed for renewed courage.

They landed on the outskirts of a ravaged village. The hatch lowered, and Marca plodded into crisp, chilly air. She studied the ruins in disappointment.

From behind, her mud-stained native robe was thrown into the dust, along with her battered sandals. She glared at Vader, flanked by stormtroopers, midway down the ramp.

“Seize her,” he commanded.

Chapter 4

Bizarre images roused Luke Skywalker from a sound sleep. He sat up on his bunk, trying to unsnarl the web of confusion inside his skull. The danger to Marca Regis had intensified somehow, and Luke knew the source: Vader.

He pulled on his orange flight suit, strapped on his blaster and lightsaber. His boots - the mud and grime of Jemeier scraped off - generated a spray of pebbles as he jogged through the mountain-carved Rebel base, bound for the hangar.

Luke didn't detour to inform Princess Leia or General Rieekan of his plans; they would neither understand nor give him permission. He notified the magnetic crane technician to load R2-D2 in his X-wing and had launched before the ever-observant protocol droid C-3PO could report to those in charge.

Marca sprinted through the settlement, past squarish adobe dwellings - another peaceful hamlet destroyed by the Imperial menace. The admiral's scratchy uniform and uncomfortable footgear prevented her from outdistancing Vader's stormtroopers. Her pulse pounded in her ears, lungs fought for air. On Shin-mara, exertion of this kind was unknown.

Toppled walls and crumbling roofs provided little concealment. She darted into an alley, risking a brief pause to catch her breath. Gravel mashed under stormtroopers' feet compelled her onward.

A partially intact stone fence offered some hope; Marca hurdled the gate. Within, a courtyard - once a playground for children, perhaps - was ringed by more modern block structures. The residents must have belonged to the higher class, she surmised.

Scampering through the nearest open door, she dove among the rubble. She managed to strip off the Imperial garb and arrange her frayed robe over her shoulders, but had no time to strap on the sandals. The sound of clanking armor drove her further into a corner.

Marca Regis doodled in the dust, mapping escape routes. The village streets ran perpendicular; if she wished to flee its limits, she need only pick a direction.

With guards roaming, however, capture remained imminent. The definitive plan came to her as she gazed at the ceiling. The roofs! Vader's men couldn't climb well, and she would make no noise if cautious. She could travel the entire stretch to open country undetected.

The girl brushed loose grain from her robe, hooked together her sandals and slunk to the entrance. Fresh abdominal pains from the injury sustained during the Star Destroyer's hyperspace jump made her discount her own ability to maneuver on the slanted surface.

Summer evenings were recalled as she mounted a lattice draped with dead vegetation. She had often enjoyed the sunset atop her family's home, Regis House. Now, she concentrated on navigating tiles weakened by laser fire. She stopped frequently, scanning the area to get her bearings and check stormtroopers' progress below. A cloudless pink sky permitted a spectacular view of farmland beyond the perimeter fortifications. To the north lay rolling hills - a perfect choice.

She swung off a quad of buildings at a wide intersection. Stormtroopers surrounded her from all sides, confining a wild animal. Marca toed the chipped pavement, at a loss, energy spent.

From the east, Darth Vader advanced, towering above her. "You are beaten, miracle worker. Surrender or die."

"Not to one who defies the Nonviolence Pact." A flick of Marca's wrist brought one of the guards' weapons to her hand. She leveled it at Vader's breathmask.

The coup impressed her captor. He ordered the stormtroopers to retreat, allowing Marca to bear west, laser rifle at his back. They soon passed beneath a sagging arch into utter desolation. Neither spoke; Marca kept her trigger finger poised.

Marching a cobblestone trail near dormant pastures, she studied structures reduced to ashes. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her pace faltered. She did not resist when Vader wrenched away the rifle and smashed it on the ground. She dissolved, sobbing, on a tree stump.

"You lack control, miracle worker. You are ignorant and sentimental, babbling about this Nonviolence Pact. The Emperor will see these faults are eliminated."

Marca regarded his ominous form, unsure how she could have so blatantly compromised her beliefs...

"Not so fast, Lord Vader."

A vaguely familiar silhouette glimmered on the horizon, smooth countenance set in a determined mask. His lightsaber's blue beam sliced the air.

"Luke, no!" squealed Marca. "I must submit to Reparation; ye must not compound your infractions..."

The Dark Lord abandoned her to accept the challenge, red laser sword crackling. Fearless men engaged in heated battle - strike here, parry - Marca judged them of comparable skill.

“Why do you defend this child, Skywalker?” Vader wheezed. “She is of no use to you.”

“I won’t... let you... have her!”

Tiring of the game, Vader accelerated his offensive. “You will both learn who is Master of the Force!”

Marca watched the pilot who had rescued her from Jemeier’s swamps straining to keep his balance against brutal slashes. She cradled the gold pendant in her palm...

The Dark Lord of the Sith stumbled on a cluster of weeds and pitched backward, handgrip flying. His helmet slammed the gravel; he lay still. Luke embraced Marca, and together they observed the unconscious figure.

“How did ye get here?” Marca prodded.

“I was on my way to Kinchenon when my scopes picked up the Y-wing. You could have broken him, Marca. What melted your resolve?”

“M’ family thrived on land such as this. We believe it is forbidden for people to harm each other...” She eyed Vader’s dusty frame. “What will ye do wi’ him?”

“To kill him now would mean freedom for the galaxy.”

“No!”

There would be other times, other places... “It would be impossible to restrain him, so...” Luke thrust his laser blade into an armored thigh.

Marca averted her face from the smell of sizzling components. “How could ye?”

Luke wiped trickles of perspiration from his brow with an orange cuff. “It’s not serious. He won’t be able to pursue us, though. Come on.” His arm around her waist, he urged her northward.

“Where are ye taking me?”

“Dagobah.”

She balked. “No. I’m going to borrow that Imperial shuttle and go home!”

“Wherever ‘home’ is for you, that won’t take you there.”

“Then, I’ll find a planet where they’ve never heard of the Empire or the Alliance!”

She hastened toward the village. Luke shook his shaggy blond head, and plodded to the X-wing.

Strange people, even stranger ideas, Marca pondered. People whose lives revolved around war and unfair laws, men lusting for power, some tempting fate with every step. How did they survive?

She tramped across torched fields, her plan to circle the capital and procure the shuttle in the east sector. If stormtroopers remained at the west gate awaiting word of Vader, her escape might be successful.

Luke's X-wing soared overhead. How in the universe could that handsome young man have become entangled in a web of pointless...

Stormtroopers had seen the fighter and were firing on it. A laser bolt hit one engine, and the craft careened toward the southern plains. Guards raced after the ship to ensure the Rebel's demise.

Marca elongated her gait. She thanked the High Spirit for this diversion - now she knew precisely where those soldiers were. The Y-wing, as suspected, stood empty. She scuttled up the ramp and secured the hatch. Groping to the cockpit, she activated the power systems and pulled the lever to ignite the converters.

Something was wrong. Marca distinguished a banging above the engines' roar. A malfunction spelled doom. Tracing the noise's origin, she paused; someone was trying to force entry!

She scowled through the porthole at a panting Luke and squat R2-D2. "Four of the troopers are dead, but the last two are right behind us," he announced when the hatch opened. "Let's get out of here."

Luke manned the controls; the vessel rose into the atmosphere. Shots from the guards' weapons jolted them, yet they made it out of range with little damage.

"Where to?" Marca inquired.

"To Yoda, on Dagobah."

"Who's Yoda?"

"A wise Jedi."

"Is he your teacher?"

"Yes."

"Either he was a poor teacher, or ye were an inattentive student."

Luke bristled. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The most basic lesson should have been the terms of the Nonviolence Pact."

"Not for us. But, I confess, I've neglected my training. If Yoda will have me back, I'll benefit from his teaching, too."

"No, Luke. I don't want anything to do with this farce. Take me to Issle Tork, or the planet where you found me. Let me live in peace."

“An illogical dream, Marca, given Vader’s knowledge of your power. We’ll make it Sarcon Six. You’ll be safe there, even if you don’t believe in the Alliance.” As he coaxed more speed from the engines, a transmission crackled through the speaker. “That’s all we need.”

Marca silenced him, flipping a switch. “‘Tis shuttle L-135.”

“Admiral Tobias? Pilte, here. We show you moving away from the Star Destroyer. What is your intended destination?”

“We received word of a disturbance in the Sarcon system. Lord Vader has commanded that we investigate.”

“Yes, sir. Pilte, out.”

Luke disengaged the transmitter and glowered at Marca. “What was that about?”

“Ye wouldn’t believe it. I don’t even know how to explain it. The crew of that ship fancies I’m their Admiral.”

“That’s absurd!”

Marca scrutinized the sideboard controls. “Don’t ye think I know that? His mighty lordship tell me ‘tis some ‘Force’. Says he has it, too. ‘Tis just the workings of the High Spirit.”

“Don’t underestimate the Force, Marca. It saved you on Jemeier.”

“What?”

“I would’ve ignored the signal from your pod, except I felt an unusual stirring in the Force. I wanted to be sure it wasn’t Vader. That’s the reason I didn’t feel Vader on Kinchenon: you’re more powerful than he!”

Marca sneered. “I don’t believe ye.”

“That is why you fail,” Luke quoted elusively.

“What?”

He cleared his mind. “Do me a favor.”

“What?”

“Play the admiral and tell the Star Destroyer to follow us.”

“Why?”

“If the stormtroopers find Vader, it will delay him resuming command.”

“No harm will come to anyone?”

“No harm,” Luke echoed. “Though how we’ll get to base without being tracked...”

Marca breathed, “I don’t know about this Force ye speak of, but ‘tis said on Shin-mara vassals of the High Spirit could make objects disappear. If we’re lucky, it may be so for me.”

“You mean, you can create a cloaking device with the Force?”

“I will make an honest attempt to manifest the effect.”

Luke snorted. “The dynamics can be tricky. The technicians who operate the equipment have to accurately calculate...”

“Well do I know.”

“You *do*?”

“Ye said to keep m’eyes open. Ye hear a lot sitting on the bridge of a Star Destroyer.”

“You’re going to have to tell me about this High Spirit later. Just swear you won’t waste your power...”

“I’m not wasting it. ‘Tis used in moderation. To abuse the High Spirit’s favors is a dangerous sport.” She focused on the transmitter. “Captain Pilte, do ye read?”

“Yes, Admiral.”

“Lord Vader wishes ye to follow us into the Sarcon system.”

“Leave Belinwacs, when the supply transports were preparing to depart?”

“Reinforcements may be required, if we flush out the Rebels.”

“Yes, sir.”

Luke relaxed as the exchange concluded. He reprogrammed the console and hailed Sarcon VI. A husky contralto responded.

“This is Rogue Base, blue leader. We copy,” came the cultured contralto.

“Rogue Base, we’ve got work for you. Darth Vader’s Star Destroyer will be in range of your guns shortly...”

“Luke, how?”

“It’s following us into the system, and will pass directly above the base.”

“Who is ‘us’?”

“Marca Regis and I. I’ll explain later, Leia. Just don’t fire on us; we’re in an Imperial Y-wing. Wait for the real enemy.”

“We copy, blue leader. Rogue base, out.”

Marca’s cheeks reddened. “You swore no harm...”

“No one will be hurt, though the Destroyer may sustain some damage,” Luke pledged.

“You are a vile...” Marca blinked salty tears. “Switch to the Imperial channel. I sense something amiss.”

Luke returned the mechanism to its default setting. Pilte’s anxious tenor implored, “L-135, do you copy?”

“Captain, this is Tobias,” replied Marca.

“Pardon, sir, but we recorded an unauthorized transmission emanating from the shuttle.”

“Blame the pilot, Captain. He saw an asteroid and panicked. Resulted in a momentary fluctuation in frequency. Everything is under control.”

“Very good, sir. We’ll be reaching the Sarcon system in one hour. Do you wish to dock before then?”

“We’ll continue to act as reconnaissance and inform ye of any necessary action.”

“Yes, sir.”

Marca slouched in the co-pilot’s seat. She massaged her neck. Luke peered at her furtively.

“Why do ye all assume every ache and pain is caused by Vader?” she remarked. “My throat hurts from talking too much. On Shin-mara, silence is valued as the fruit of wisdom.”

“An old friend of mine would agree with you, I think.” Luke smiled at his recollection of Obi-Wan Kenobi, the Jedi Master who had enlightened him to the ways of the Force. Luke pictured himself having the opportunity to do the same with Marca. He indicated Sarcon VI as they neared. “Mountain terrain. Perfect camouflage for the base.”

“People live underground?”

“For the most part. You’ll see when we land.”

Orbiting Sarcon V, Marca had a chance to admire the system’s most beautiful planet. Blues and greens blended to give the impression of a precious gem. Thin wisps of white clouds danced in the atmosphere. She gaped at the sight.

“A battle here long ago poisoned the air,” Luke recounted. “Only the weeds survived.”

Marca cursed. Such loveliness, and uninhabitable!

“The Star Destroyer is in range of our guns,” said Luke. “This is a good time to make our exit.”

Marca quieted her being, one hand clasped around the Maran pendant. Luke glimpsed her lips move, but noted no change in their status. He touched her sleeve in a gesture of encouragement, and immediately the control panel resounded with Imperial requests for their coordinates. The craft veered back toward the Rebel base, unseen by battling factions.

The unexpected Alliance attack staggered the enormous Imperial ship. X-wings disabled TIE fighters before they could arm their lasers. Deflector shields broke under heavy bombardment by ion cannons. When the Y-wing approached Sarcon VI, the Destroyer had lumbered away, a shattered hulk.

Luke and Marca materialized within the small planet’s protective energy field. A cheering crowd met them in the rock-hewn docking bay, despite the

Imperial ship's foreboding appearance. The pair were carried on the shoulders of other pilots to where Princess Leia, officious in white uniform, waited at the main control console.

Skywalker received an affectionate hug from the young woman, and a hearty handshake from tall, greying General Rieekan. Marca did not know how to react to the Princess - of equal class to her own, potentially, but much more... imperious. She accepted Rieekan's hand.

"Marca is responsible for our success," trumpeted Luke. "She tricked the Star Destroyer into the system."

Leia studied the unshod, petite teen. "The Empire isn't that stupid."

"Your Highness!" the General scolded. "This girl has won us a great victory. Why are you always so suspicious?"

"Because I know Imperial tactics. She might be a spy."

Luke's lightsaber flew to Marca's hand. "If I possessed a weapon, I would offer it as a sign of good faith. I do not abide by this way of life, but I'll try to be useful while I remain among ye."

Leia softened. She took the handgrip and squeezed Marca's arm. Then she addressed the crowd. "Members of the Rebel Alliance, let us welcome Marca Regis!"

Chapter 5

Night descended on Sarcon VI, yet the Rebels did not retire. Marca, however, had used more than her share of energy, and exhaustion claimed priority.

Princess Leia Organa, former senator of Alderaan, escorted the girl to a simply furnished bunk room, leaving her on a vacant bed. “Sleep, now. Tomorrow, you’ll begin your training.”

Marca did not concern herself with the future; she crawled under the covers, fully clothed. No dreams disturbed her slumber - something she would recall in days to come. The noises of external activity did not rouse her, either.

Through a narrow crevice, rays from the dawning sun awakened her the next morning. Hanging on a wall hook, she found an outfit similar to those worn in the hangar: khaki trousers, a linen shirt and belt. A tray laden with fruit, bread and cheese waited on the table.

Leia heard her movements and came to greet her. “You’ll be more comfortable in those clothes,” commented the Princess. “We work hard around here, and that robe will only get in your way.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’ll wear m’own.”

Leia departed, frowning. Marca washed, employed a stiff brush to tame her curly hair, and laced her sandals. When she looked up from this task, Luke was framed in the doorway.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I hope so.”

The pair traversed the base to the hangar, where countless fighters and larger craft waited in neat formations. “I’ve volunteered to teach you how to handle an X-wing. It would help if you wore the same clothes as we do.”

“Why should m’clothes matter, if m’intentions are pure?”

“You can’t possibly fly a fighter or perform assigned duties wrapped in a bed sheet!”

Marca snickered, “Try me.” She turned to a lean, ebony-crested Rebel repairing a transport communication link. “Come here, m’friend.”

The man set aside his tools.

Luke asked, “What have you got in mind?”

“Allot us, say, three identical tasks. If I finish before this man, the matter of m’clothes will be dropped. If I cannot finish, I’ll gladly don Rebel garb.”

The squadron commander chuckled. “Well, Bonn, can you handle such a contest?”

The Rebel’s weathered skin wrinkled when he grinned. “Sure.”

“All right, then. You’ll each remove an engine from that wrecked X-wing and take it to be repaired. Then, you’ll sweep the bunk rooms. After that, you’ll perform a damage check of the base’s external camouflage.”

Marca’s violet eyes widened. Bonn guffawed, “That’ll take the rest of the day!”

Luke countered, “If it will prove my point, I don’t care if it takes a week!” He passed the two opponents a spanner. “Better get started.”

Rebellion members were gathering for their midday repast when Bonn loped down the passage, shirt drenched with oil and sweat. A weary smile lit his face.

“Where’s Marca?” called Luke.

Bonn shrugged.

“Here!” The girl emerged from the galley, yawning. “I helped prepare the meal while waiting for Bonn to finish.”

Both men chortled, and when the story circulated among the crowd, they joined in the merriment. Luke patted Marca’s shoulder. “You *are* something special, Marca!”

She sobered. “I’m nothing special. Luke, I’m afraid I won’t be able to learn what ye plan to teach me, if it means risking the loss of m’faith.”

“You flew with me.”

“Against m’will!”

Skywalker sighed. “I’ll be with you. Come on.”

Training Marca proved an exercise in patience for the Rebel. Her unique spirituality and lack of experience prevented her from comprehending his instructions. There was no denying she put forth every effort, but some concepts eluded her.

Each day, she apologized for being so thickheaded. “You’ve got to have confidence,” chided Luke. “One day, you’ll be out among the stars, and you’ll have to fight to survive.”

Night after night, her agony increased. Her tiny frame found no comfort on the lumpy bunk. Intellect battled instinct - she could not reconcile the right with the necessary. Nonviolence was right; peace was right. Achieving peace was necessary. Still, the latter meant death!

Memories of Vader haunted her. She could not forswear she would rather have dispatched him than subject herself to Reparation at his hands. Yet, how many of his men had been killed or injured when the Star Destroyer was attacked, a plan she had unwittingly condoned?

“Why am I here?” rang repeatedly in her head. This distress impelled her stomach to reject nourishment, and her entire body constantly ached. She wept spontaneously and uncontrollably, which drained her strength further.

One evening, off-duty personnel sat on the mountainside watching a glorious blue sunset. The tranquility prompted tales of each pilot’s home planet. Marca grew uneasy listening to talk of marksmanship, ‘speeder racing and skirmishes with the Empire. She quietly excused herself.

“Don’t go, Marca,” pleaded the wiry Bonn Campbell. “We want to hear about Shin-mara.”

She glanced at Luke; he nodded. “Shin-mara is a placid world. We know nothing of the Empire. The Council of the High Spirit rules and handles any disputes according to the Nonviolence Pact. We have no weapons or technology; we eat food grown in the soil. Our garments symbolize an uncomplicated lifestyle. Do ye know I’d never seen a zipper or button before I came here?”

The group laughed. Her stomach unknotted.

“M’people live by faith. We believe the High Spirit binds us together and provides for our existence. And, because the Spirit loves us all, we hold no one should raise a hand against his brethren.”

“Why did you resist Vader, then?” spouted Farnok Gill.

Troubled violet orbs met his harsh glare. “If the only alternative is death, would ye not fight?”

On this sour note, the throng dispersed. Luke remained behind as Marca contemplated the dusk. “I feel like giving up,” she lamented.

He’d noticed how her youthful appearance had deteriorated during weeks of training. “What’s bothering you?”

“I’ve betrayed m’family, everything I was raised to believe, and worse, this cause. According to our laws, I should submit m’self to Vader for Reparation, even if it means m’d death.”

Skywalker cupped his palm around her chin and stared into lonely eyes. “Don’t talk that way. You can help us more than you realize. Darth Vader is evil, and you are good. Self-pity will just weaken you. I’m sorry you can’t go back to Shin-mara, but this is your home now, and everyone cares about you.” He kissed her forehead. “We’d better get inside. It’s getting chilly.”

Vader’s imposing presence dominated her dreams that night. He brandished his lightsaber overhead, roaring, “Surrender or die.” Marca tossed fitfully; attempts to dispel the vision failed. She awoke screaming.

Slipping into her sandals, she crept down the corridor. No one saw her slink into the hangar and grope through the dimness for an X-wing near the external doors.

“Artoo, pass me that tubing,” a voice startled her. Luke lay beneath his fighter, repairing a connector. She crept onward, praying he wouldn’t notice.

A lamp flashed in her face. “Marca! What are you doing?”

“I keep seeing Vader. I have no choice...”

“I felt a stirring, too. But there’s nothing we can do. Give me time to finish up here, then I’ll walk you back to your quarters.”

He secured the tube and replaced his tools as Marca dawdled, uncertain. Wiping grimy hands on the backside of his orange jumpsuit, he guided her between the ships. Nearing the Imperial Y-wing, the teen wriggled from his grasp.

“Marca!”

“I’ve got to go, Luke, or y’all will die!”

Inside the craft, she revved the engines. Luke opened the mammoth bay doors from the control board and swung aboard before the hatch closed. “I’m coming with you. Maybe I can change your mind.” They floated into the night sky undetected.

“Good morning, Your Highness. I thought you’d want to know Commander Skywalker and Marca Regis did not report for morning assembly,” announced General Rieekan when they met in the command center. “The hangar crew also reported the Imperial shuttle missing.”

“Check the comscanners. Is anything out there?”

“Nothing in range of our sensors, Your Highness,” a technician related.

“Where could they be?”

Rieekan perused the master board. “What puzzles me is why they didn’t take their fighters.”

Leia monitored the screens. “Would they go to Kinchenon?”

“Luke knows better, even if Marca suggested it. They’d need a full legion to penetrate the Empire’s defenses.”

“Luke said the Force is strong with the girl...”

“That doesn’t matter. They wouldn’t...” Something cracked through the transmitter. “They couldn’t!”

“I don’t care who’s right or wrong,” retorted Marca. “I will not have any part in killing.”

Luke rationalized, “If you help the Alliance, the killing will stop.”

“So, what do ye propose?”

“We’re in range of Belinwacs. If we further disable Vader’s Star Destroyer, that would leave one less ship to battle later.”

Marca considered. “At least lives would not be lost.”

She clutched Luke's shoulder, whispering unintelligible prayers. Wings collapsed, the invisible shuttle drifted onto the massive Imperial craft which hovered unsteadily above the planet. In a row of identical configurations, deck officers disregarded the additional ship when it materialized.

Fingers entwined, the occupants disembarked unseen. The Rebel pilot paused to warn his companion, "They *can* hear us, even if we're cloaked. I want to disconnect the anti-grav stabilizers on the bridge, which will burn out the sublight engines when they try to leave orbit."

"One thing at a time, Luke," sputtered Marca. "Look!"

Captain Pilte and two other officers in green entered the bay. The Rebels moved to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"...and with Lord Vader aboard, repairs must be expedited," Pilte was saying. "He wants that 'miracle worker' and Skywalker at any cost. More mistakes means heads will roll."

"What about Admiral Tobias' advice?" inquired a junior officer.

"If you want to incur the wrath of the most powerful being in the galaxy, bar the Emperor - be my guest. I'll do what I'm told. Besides, Tobias is dead."

The trio passed. Luke and Marca skulked toward the lift. A stormtrooper happened along when the doors retracted, but he ignored it as another malfunction wrought by battle damage.

The intruders relaxed as the conveyance propelled them upward. "What if Vader is on the bridge?" Marca ventured.

"Neither he nor anyone else will know we've been here until it's too late. Trust the Force."

Invisible again, they tip-toed on the split deck's metal floor. Luke directed Marca between personnel to the navigation console. From the bottom of the panel, he ripped a handful of wires. "That does it," he muttered. "In an hour, they'll be permanent residents."

An alarm blared. Access to the lift barred by stormtroopers, that menacing baritone froze Luke and Marca in mid-stride.

"I know you are here, miracle worker, And young Skywalker is with you."

"Yes, m'lord," replied Marca, against Luke's silent objection.

"You are an obedient servant. You will be rewarded."

Bred in an upper class, the idea of servitude irked Marca. Revulsion at Vader's tyranny augmented her disgust. "I didn't come for the reasons ye think." She released Luke's hand, instantly visible. "I came to finish what the Alliance began."

She touched her medallion and saluted the Dark Lord. He retreated toward his throne. Marca advanced, pausing when Luke yelled, "Don't!"

The crew shuddered when Vader's knees buckled.

"Don't give in to hate!" admonished Luke.

Marca bellowed, "'Tis not hate, 'tis his Reparation!"

The Sith Lord crashed into the bulkhead and sank to the deck. A twitch of Marca's digits drew a tormented wail from his mangled breathmask. The cry unnerved everyone present.

Frustrated, Luke seized Marca's arm. "Have you had your fun for the day?"

"I'm not done." She addressed the crew. "Remember what Admiral Tobias told ye: Vader cannot harm ye unless ye fear him!" She stroked Luke's wrist and vanished.

"Rogue Base, this is blue leader, requesting permission to land."

"It's about time, Commander. Welcome home."

Marca and Luke reported to the command center upon arrival. Leia dismissed Marca and let her anger fly at Luke. Later, General Rieekan found Marca, dejected and pale, nursing a mug of ale in the cavernous galley. Her palsied hands and sunken violet orbs worried him.

"Well, Marca, you've had more contact with Imperial forces in recent weeks than anyone I know. I intercepted some coded transmissions this morning; you might be able to help me decipher them. Do you know why Lord Vader would put a deathmark on someone called 'miracle worker'?"

She couldn't hide her amusement. "I'm his miracle worker, General. Vader has called me that since we first crossed paths. I don't think he knows m'name."

"What did you do to outrage him?"

Marca detailed her adventures since being abducted by the Faithless on Shin-mara. "'Tis understandable why he despises me. And, because he shall continue to hunt me, I am endangering this crusade. I'll pack m'things and..."

"Cadet, you will not leave this base unless so ordered," commanded Rieekan. "You're safe here, and you can be an incredible asset to us. The day will come when we will achieve victory over the Empire with your help.

"You'll continue training with Commander Skywalker. In our next offensive, you should be ready to join gold squadron, with the rank and privileges of a lieutenant."

"If 'tis m'Reparation, I will submit, Your Worship." She gave her traditional salute as she departed. "I'll be with Luke if ye have need of me."

Skywalker reclined on his bunk, eyes closed. Marca nudged him; he woke with a loud snort.

“I was looking for you,” he grunted.

“General Rieekan and I had a talk. I’ve been confined to base.”

Luke propped himself on an elbow. “Good. What was the big idea up there?”

“The horrors I’ve seen Vader perpetrate, his Reparation is long overdue...”

“If this Reparation you harp on includes torture, you and Vader may be kindred spirits. Killing him would’ve been more merciful, and more advantageous. He remains a threat.”

“Ye had a chance to kill him on Belinwacs, but ye didn’t.”

“Anyway, Leia showed me the new schedule. In the morning, we train together. Afternoons you’ll be spending with your new squadron, under my supervision. Any further infractions and it’s your neck.”

Marca averted her gaze.

“What’s the matter now?”

“Ye know I can’t stay. Every soul loyal to the Emperor will be searching for me. ‘Twill be the end of the Alliance’s chances if I don’t leave.”

Luke gripped her bony shoulders. “If you’ve been ordered to stay, you stay. No matter how much we need you, if you disobey again, it means court-martial and a mining colony. Do you want to spend the rest of your life sifting dirt?”

“If ‘tis m’Reparation...”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I have seen many undergo Reparation. The Nonviolence Pact stipulates a verdict of swift mutilation and death, or perpetual exile. M’offenses do not warrant the clemency of expulsion.”

“Let it go, already! You’ve got a job to do, Marca, and you must promise not to leave without permission.”

“I can’t. I must do as m’faith dictates.” She slid free and scurried from the bunk room.

Luke sank onto the mattress. “Ben, protect her!”

The pink sun shone through hangar doors, reflected off X-wing fighters. A patrol was returning from its predawn maneuvers, another outbound. When Luke Skywalker strode across the floor - uniform half-zipped, hair matted - everyone knew a disaster had occurred.

“Major, have you seen Cadet Regis this morning?” he quizzed the older man at the control console.

“No.”

“She didn’t go out with gold squadron?”

“Not that I’m aware. She would’ve had clearance, and I’ve no record of it.”

“Then, where is her ship?” Luke hurried to the command center. “General Rieekan!”

Leia Organa silenced him with a frigid scowl. “He’s decoding a transmission from your little friend.”

Rieekan swivelled from the vast bank of knobs and toggles. “The message is for you, Commander. I quote: ‘I cannot renounce my faith. I’m sorry.’”

“Of all the…” spat Leia.

“Commander, Marca has gone too far this time. When she is apprehended, she will be court-martialed.”

Luke ran a hand through his blond mop. “What kind of sentence would be imposed?”

“Most likely, death.”

Chapter 6

By the Spirit! Marca groaned. I've really made a mess of things. She caressed the gold sunburst resting atop her robes. Had the Faithless not abducted her, she would have sat on the Council and maintained peace. Here, no one seemed to plumb the concept.

Still, home was beyond her. Home. Surrounded by verdant pastures, Regis House's granite facade impressed the lower classes. Her father and his brother had led influential lives as Councillors, wealth and power theirs.

That's why the Faithless had chosen them as victims. What better way to prove the Council's true vulnerability than by harming its members? Marca would never forget the terror of traveling in a craft that, compared to her X-wing, amounted to scrap metal. Pound upon pound of thrust had anchored her to the cushions until her body wanted to explode. Careening over deserts at breakneck speed, her mind could form no coherent thought.

After 17 harvests in the peace of Shin-mara, she now knew nothing but turmoil. Her father confining her to the pod, catapulted thousands of meters into the atmosphere, a needle prick, then oblivion. What heresy had propelled her off the planet, and how long had she slept before awakening on Jemeier? she pondered.

From one planet to another, she grappled with this strange universe. No wonder m'faith has been shaken. I must get hold of m'self!

What am I doing now? she mused. Overreacting to m'own guilt. I have caused death, and attempted to kill Darth Vader wi' m'own hand. 'Tis only justice I submit m'self to those I have wronged for Reparation.

A meteor sped past the fighter, and she barely avoided a collision. Artoo squealed.

"'Tis all right, little one," she responded to the translation on the screen. "Keep your sensors tuned for anything suspicious. I don't want to fly into an Imperial patrol."

Marca envisioned the Sith Lord among the stars. Was this "Force" so important he killed for it? After prolonged rumination, she realized he would kill anyone who opposed him. Might her surrender relieve his oppression of the Alliance?

"Don't give in to the Dark Side!" an unfamiliar voice interrupted her deliberations.

"But the peace of the galaxy..."

"Tyranny is not peace. Darth Vader's lust for power will not be satisfied by your abasement. The Empire will continue to exploit those it rules..."

Gershon Olial's reechoing tale of 14-hour work days corroborated this. Who could be providing such insights with the transmitter disconnected? Artoo called Marca's attention to the scopes. A craft was swiftly gaining on the X-wing.

"Can ye identify it?"

The silver and blue 'droid indicated TIE class, paralleling their course. "Evasive action recommended."

Marca veered off as the enemy ship overtook them. Artoo suggested pursuit, but she balked at the idea. The 'droid took control of the fighter. Wings split as they made chase, and the targeting device lit up in Marca's face. When she should have pressed the trigger, she demurred. Chirping in annoyance, Artoo fired a blast which missed, and the Imperial craft sped out of range.

"Sorry, little one," Marca sighed. "'Tis not right to shoot one's brethren, especially in the back."

"It's your duty," beeped Artoo.

She slumped in the uncomfortable seat. Luke had hounded her about duty. Would she ever learn what it meant?

The X-wing landed far outside Issle Tork. Tall trees offered adequate cover to prevent its accidental discovery. How beautiful the landscape was here, beyond the realm of stormtroopers and landspeeders. Fields high with wildflowers fostered recollections of springtime on Shin-mara. She prayed the High Spirit would bring eternal springtime to Kinchenon and all planets under Imperial domination.

Boulder piles made progress difficult near the city. In her sandals, Marca had to be extra cautious - a twisted ankle would do her no favors. She reached the Old City well after sunset and slipped unnoticed into the bustling cantina, where she had spent an evening seeming eons ago.

Gershon Olial, rather drunk, recognized the curl-framed face, but couldn't place the clothes. Flowing white robe with red piping, open-toed sandals - no one wore such costumes these days. Blurred green optics registered Mark Regis. Did the boy have a twin sister?

Marca had chosen an isolated corner of the establishment, sitting with her back to the wall. Stormtroopers periodically poked their helmets in the main entrance. Olial stumbled over, anxious to relieve his confusion, and spilled ale on the table.

"How are ye, Master Olial?" she greeted.

"Then I do know you!" he drawled, plopping on the bench opposite.

"Ye should. I almost caused your death."

“Mark Regis!”

“More or less.”

An attendant brought Olial a fresh mug. “I heard a story just this shift: you knocked ol’ Vader cold on the bridge of his own Star Destroyer. Is it true?”

“I’m not proud to say it, but yes.”

Gershon Olial belched. “Whatta you mean, you’re not proud? That devil deserves a taste of his own medicine! He thinks he can push us around, and now he knows there’s someone who’s his better.”

Marca couldn’t suppress a smile. Had she not felt the same in days past? “Master Olial, wi’ all these ‘troopers at hand, it might be wise to lower your voice.”

The foreman gulped his ale and belched again. His bald head lolled sideways; he slept.

Two stormtroopers had entered the cantina during Olial’s tirade and were interrogating customers at the bar. Marca surveyed them with hooded lids; they *were* asking about her!

Fear iced her veins. She vowed not to let them arrest her. She had no weapon, but she would bring the roof down on their heads if need be. She wasn’t prepared to face Vader... yet.

Rising, she edged through the crowd toward a rear door. The guards drew their blasters and blocked her path. Nothing happened.

Binders snapped around her slender wrists. All eyes focused on her, she was dragged into the gloomy street like a common criminal.

Two white-armored figures stood inside the cramped cell. Marca knew another pair of stormtroopers patrolled the corridor. Vader was taking no risks.

Sitting on a hard slab, the textured wall irritated her spine. She couldn’t fathom why the High Spirit had not come to her aid in the cantina or during the march to the Imperial Administration Complex. Might Reparation have truly been owed to the Alliance, and now her deity had shunned her? She had disobeyed her Rebel superiors, but that paled in comparison to the harm she had inflicted on Imperial forces...

“Patience, child,” rang inside her skull. “Fear and hatred lead to the Dark Side. Your emotions will be your undoing, unless you tread your chosen path wisely.”

Marca squirmed at the ethereal verbalization.

Her guards raised their weapons. “You are not to move,” one barked.

“I could kill ye wi’out moving.”

“It would not go well with Lord Vader if you did,” asserted the other.

“I can only be subjected to one Reparation, whether I harm one or thousands.”

A uniformed officer entered the cell, dismissing the stormtroopers. His hideous, jaundiced features and toothy sneer repulsed Marca.

She queried, “What do ye want?”

“You have been invited to a celebration,” he gurgled.

“What?”

He motioned her forward. The four guards joined them for a labyrinthine trek... to the torture chamber.

Marca had never imagined such paraphernalia. The ceiling barely high enough for average humans, narrow aisles led past cages with floors of spikes, a pair of green Rolts confined in stocks, and a rack on which a dockhand in blue jumpsuit was being unmercifully stretched.

The officer halted near a bed of nails wired to an electrical generator. Marca shied away when he threw back the straps. The guards grabbed her arms and tugged her toward the apparatus.

“No!” she screamed. She shook off the stormtroopers’ gloves and whirled on the grinning officer. “Did Vader order this? The Reparation protocols...”

“His lordship wishes you... purified of any... rebellious tendencies. He desires only the best for you.”

Four laser rifles propelled her onto the spikes. Marca cleared her mind and lowered herself onto the sharp prongs, swallowing a cry.

“How does it feel?” hissed her captor.

“Like a field of thorn-wheat.”

A current jolted her. She grimaced. “Just a moment, my dear. There’s more to come.” A grinding motor broke tiles loose from the ceiling. Glistening nails appeared as another panel descended. Marca imagined herself a moth-eaten tapestry. Nerves were assaulted by sparks. Blood spurted from her limbs. She wondered why Vader wasn’t there to witness her anguish.

“I like this instrument so much,” the officer gloated. “It makes even the most stubborn Wookiee cooperative.”

The idea this atrocity was used on innocent creatures enraged Marca.

Galvanized metal curled, liquified by the heat of her resolve. She rolled off the table, intent on destruction. Before the stormtroopers could react, a rifle had flown into her hands, and she dissuaded their attack with a short blast.

“Go tell Vader he shouldn’t play wi’ bombs. Next time we meet, I may explode in his face!”

The green-clad flunky scuttled from the room. A well-aimed laser burst detonated the master control panel, freeing the prisoners. Binders still cuffing her

wrists, Marca dashed for the windows. As Luke had predicted, her journey to Issle Tork had proven nothing.

Stormtroopers converged on the chamber. She shot at their feet; for every one who retreated, two more appeared. She had mounted the ledge when a bolt ripped her left arm. I'll not give up, she swore. Unable to raise the glass, she ducked behind an oversized iron maiden and exhausted the rifle's charge.

"Your actions betray desperation, miracle worker," rumbled that baritone. "There is no escape."

Bloody and weakened, Marca peered around the huge contraption. "Then I'll die trying."

The Dark Lord parted the corps. "You seek peace in the galaxy."

"Peace *and* justice."

"Together, we could achieve that."

"I've seen your idea of justice. Ye are a power hungry tyrant who knows no compassion."

The breathmask tremored. "You must tame your tongue. Respect for those in authority is vital in a peaceful society."

"Who can respect an iron-fisted egomaniac?"

Within arm's length, the slap of his metallic glove stung Marca's cheek. "Iron-fisted, yes. That is a trait of anyone in authority. Egomaniac, no. I do the bidding of the Emperor. Do you think I need all this to manifest my power?"

"Ye don't need it, but ye want it just the same."

Her other cheek glowed red from the second blow. "You will learn not to offer your opinion unless asked." Vader summoned two stormtroopers. "Take her to my chambers. Do not leave her alone under any circumstances."

The Dark Lord's black cloak dusted the floor as he withdrew. Marca ached to trip him... Her parents had nurtured her self-discipline over many harvests; she must reign in her temper and face Reparation with dignity and calm.

She sat with her guards in the sumptuous apartment utilized by Darth Vader when on Kinchenon. If Gershon Olial and his laborers could see the ostentatious furnishings, they would riot. A hand-carved wooden throne, well cushioned chairs, an elegant crystal chandelier - instead of the inadequate lighting commoners endured - might not compare to her home on Shin-mara, but those who had less would see it as wealth.

Vader whisked across the threshold; the stormtroopers leapt to attention and yanked Marca to her feet. "Bow to his lordship, prisoner," she was prompted.

"I pay homage to no man."

The guard at her left raked the side of her brunette head with his rifle butt, knocking her to the floor. Vader dismissed the soldiers. The door locked behind them.

“I do not wish you harm, miracle worker,” wheezed through the breathmask.

Was he actually being civil? “Nor I ye. I know I must submit to Reparation for m’ offenses, but does that mean treating me with contempt?”

The Sith Lord perched himself on the throne. “Years ago, I lost someone because I showed leniency.”

“Luke?”

A curt nod.

“He has great faith,” opined Marca.

“The Force is strong in him, but stronger in you.”

Subduing pain from multiple gashes and punctures, Marca righted herself on the woven carpet. She chuckled at Vader’s revelation. Her robe soaked with blood, how could he believe her strong?

“Wi’ your power, ye could have created a paradise here,” she cooed.

“You speak the truth. If we were allies, we could bring freedom to all peoples.”

“If it meant your Reparation revoked, would ye swear to that?”

Darth Vader buried her diminutive hand in his massive glove. A burst of energy rocked his immense frame. The sensation seemed to please him. “Accept the power of the Dark Side, and you will see things as I do.”

Marca jerked away, horrified. A memory crept from its tomb: Admiral Clarion, Supreme Councillor of the High Spirit, ordering the Reparation of those branded “Faithless” - execution *en masse* - to prevent further conflict among the people. The heretics had escaped, to wreak continual havoc...

If Vader’s “Force” was held as the faith of the Empire, and Luke Skywalker was merely a misguided dissident...

The Sith Lord had not moved. His ruse had targeted the child’s naivete...

Quivering fingers slid into his waiting grasp.

Chapter 7

“What are you going to do about it?” Leia shrieked, seated at the command center console.

Luke shrugged. “I really don’t know. Marca isn’t...”

“Right in the head. She’s an ignorant little...”

“Leia, stop it! Marca just doesn’t understand what we’re up against. She’s never seen an evil like Vader’s, and she’s awestruck. She’s terribly bewildered, too. She doesn’t know who to trust.”

“If I looked at you,” scoffed the Princess, “and at Vader, *I’d* know who to trust.”

“But if you’d lived somewhere almost everyone you met could be trusted, could you say the same thing?”

Luke’s reasoning failed to sway the former senator of Alderaan. She spun her chair toward the sensor screens. “Just find her!”

No sweeter consolation had Marca Regis experienced since her anointing as heir to the Council of the High Spirit at her thirteenth harvest. During an elaborate ceremony on a sweltering afternoon in Issle Tork’s public square, Darth Vader officially proclaimed her his First Minister. She wore a simple, hand-sewn white robe, red piping at the hem. Vader viewed this as a distinct variance from his imposing black garb. The gold Maran sunburst dangled on a polished chain. Despite the pomp, her complexion appeared all the more pale for the brunette wisps circling her face.

On her right index finger, the Sith Lord slipped an exquisite silver ring set with a faceted blue jewel. “This is a seal of authority from the Emperor himself. You will obey my First Minister in a manner consistent to my own directives.”

From that point, Marca became Vader’s companion, monitored during his absence by a shifty-eyed lieutenant, her “bodyguard”. The knowledge acquired during her adventure on the Star Destroyer served her well; she often formulated solutions to minor administrative problems before the Dark Lord had a chance to weigh options.

A variety of physical challenges were presented, also. Among them, her mentor ordered her to an abandoned farm south of the city. His rapid gait forced her to hitch up her flowing skirts and run. When they arrived, he allowed her only a moment to recover. He watched as she tearfully explored the rubble.

“The family who lived here knew abiding love,” Marca whispered.

“In the days to come, you will know abiding power,” responded Vader. He balanced splintered timber atop her curly hair. “Spread your arms.” In each

outstretched hand, he placed a baked clay brick. “I have observed your concentration is easily disrupted. Your task is to rebuild this house, using the Force, without succumbing to any distractions.”

Holding the bricks strained her biceps. Keeping her head level so the lumber would not fall tapped her strength. She breathed evenly and imagined the dwelling restored. Soon, boards and shingles began to vibrate, rise from their piles and solidify into walls and roof. When reconstruction was complete, Marca collapsed, unconscious.

Vader himself carried the limp form to the Imperial Administration Complex. She showed no signs of awakening until they were ascending in the lift.

He left her to recuperate in her lavish suite, after presenting her with a stubby metal cylinder. “You have learned the fundamentals of our routine well. One in authority, however, must be able to deal with matters more serious than mechanical malfunctions.”

Marca examined the lightsaber. She had toyed with Luke’s weapon on Sarcon VI, shredding mountainside foliage. She had watched the Rebel practicing skills which had kept him alive through many battles. Now she would be taught by a master of the art. The prospect delighted her.

Nonetheless, she could not eat; night after night, her sleep was disturbed by a chorus crying across the galaxy for justice.

“Reparation! Reparation!” they screamed. “You have broken the terms of the Nonviolence Pact!”

Even the mysterious, disembodied advisor’s tone altered. “The subtle allure of the Dark Side has blinded you to your purpose. Will you accept the truth only when Lord Vader demands that you kill your friends?”

During one unusually traumatic episode, the Dark Lord heard her agonized screams from his chambers above and went to investigate.

Violet eyes glared at the black spectre, part of her nightmare. When gloved fingers brushed her tear-stained cheek, she melted in his unwilling embrace.

“Our struggle is an eternal one,” he rumbled. “Soon you will have sufficient control of the Force to block out your past failures.”

Morning found the pair hiking west from Issle Tork on a shady flagstone lane. Marca had no time to revel in this tranquility. The Imperial Training Facility dominated the landscape - rolling hills surrounded by a grove of fruit trees. The outpost’s director conducted them through a spacious gymnasium, where Imperial soldiers of all ranks exercised with weights and other equipment. Beyond a set of double doors, another gymnasium of equal size had been reserved for their use.

Having dismissed their guide, Vader unclasped his bulky cloak and slung it over a nearby bench. Deft fingers detached his lightsaber from a belt clip and

activated a red energy beam. Marca imitated the procedure clumsily. She thought her greenish blade an intriguing contrast.

“The Jedi Knights of past ages used these weapons for defense. They show a strength paramount to use of blaster or rifle. To face another, whether in training or in battle, means placing oneself under the protection of the Force.”

Marca raised her weapon parallel to Vader’s.

“Close your eyes,” he instructed. “Let the Force control your movements.”

The Dark Lord slashed viciously at her head. Instinct spurred Marca to duck. Her laser sword twirled in a blocking motion; the impact of the two blades’ collision sent pain shooting up her emaciated arms. She moaned.

In a nominal demonstration of gentleness, Vader extinguished his weapon. Marca’s lightsaber arced, stopping short of his breathmask as she opened her lids.

“Admirable technique,” he praised, flinching. “Indeed, the Force is strong in you.”

She bowed her head. “I could feel it.”

They repeated these drills each day, advancing until Marca forced Darth Vader into a defensive posture, rather than offensive.

“By the Spirit, this is glorious!” she breathed.

Vader squeezed his handgrip. “You are ready for the next test.”

“Test?”

“I have decided to place into your hands the execution of the very Reparation you so crave. Within the hour, you will assume jurisdiction over my Tribunal.”

Marca saluted in her native fashion. “I am honored, m’lord.”

“It is I who am honored to have such a dedicated advisor and confidant. If you encounter any difficulties in the fulfillment of these duties, do not hesitate to consult me.”

She did not reply, flustered by his words. What difficulties did he foresee?

The Imperial Tribunal occupied the top floor of the Administration Complex. The stark chamber served to impress miscreants with the magnitude of Vader’s power.

Laborers attired in jumpsuits, uniformed soldiers, and Rolts lined the seats. A lieutenant ordered the assembly to rise when the First Minister entered. She circumvented a dias supporting an extravagant armchair. Marca’s breeding spurned the notion of looking down on others. She mounted two inlaid steps, sitting on the third. She signaled to a haughty female at the records desk. “You may begin.”

“Lieutenant Genna Honan,” came the nasal pronouncement.

A robust officer was ushered from the detention block by armed guards, the first woman in Imperial raiment Marca had seen. She had presumed only men could serve Vader. So it had been on Shin-mara: the males worked; the females tended their homes.

“The lieutenant has committed...” read the clerk.

“None of that,” Marca interjected. “Let the accused speak for herself. What did ye do, m’friend?”

Standing at attention, Genna Honan’s oval face contorted in amazement. “Ma’am, I did nothing. Two of my fellow officers sought my favors one night aboard a Star Cruiser, and when I refused, they reported me for treason.”

“They expected ye to be punished?”

“Yes, ma’am. They wished me to be executed, to assure my silence regarding the molestation.”

“Give the names of the reprobates to the clerk, then ye may go.”

Lieutenant Honan saluted and retreated down the aisle. The spectators had ceased their murmuring. They had come expecting a blood bath, but now...

“Next!” directed Marca.

Thirteen prisoners were released that afternoon. Of those, six women had been falsely charged by men denied their “rights”. Through this testimony, Marca either paced the main floor, or sat on a step. Once she learned the truth, the innocent were dismissed.

Thundering applause accompanied the session’s conclusion. Even before dusk, news of these unprecedented rulings had spread throughout Issle Tork.

Stormtroopers erected barricades against hordes hoping to attend the next day’s Tribunal. Families of prisoners hoped for the acquittal of their kin. Those who filed indictments feared their own safety, in case the charges were judged false. The appointment of Marca Regis as First Minister was touted as a propitious event.

Members of Vader’s personal retinue had to exert considerable clout to gain entry to the gallery. They reported to the Dark Lord after observing the proceedings for ten days. His gloved fists clenched while they related how Marca had endeared herself to the throngs - not just loyal Imperials, but the commoners, and even the Rolts. He saw the threat to his supremacy.

“Notify the First Minister I require her presence immediately.”

The crowd vented their disapproval when the Tribunal adjourned abruptly. Marca ordered an ill-mannered Rolt kept in custody until the hearing could reconvene, which angered his comrades.

“Justice delayed is still justice!” she pledged, striding from the room.

Her jovial mood mellowed when she entered the Dark Lord's chambers. Vader's haughty bearing evinced repressed wrath. Two officers saluted and departed, as his rage erupted.

"I trusted you to mete out justice in the Tribunal. Instead, you have created chaos."

"M'lord, ye are mistaken. The Tribunal has been used as means to avenge a heartbroken man against the object of his misplaced affections, or a justly rebuked soldier against his superior. Those who pervert justice are the ones who should submit to Reparation!"

Vader's entire body shook with fury. "You dare speak to me in that insolent tone? I could destroy you..."

"Ye know 'tis not true. 'Tis fact throughout this system the Empire now works for peace. Your power has only increased in the wake of what I have done."

That daunting breathmask trembled and, then, he exhaled. "You are ready for the final test. Come."

Outside the Administration Complex, a landspeeder waited to transport them to the docks. At Bay 24, they scrutinized a crew loading crates onto a freighter of serpentine contours. Marca recognized the corpulent supervisor, Gershon Olial.

"This ship was scheduled for departure two hours ago with replacement supplies for my Star Destroyer," expounded Vader. "I will allow you to rectify matters."

"As ye wish."

Marca strode between rows of cargo. Dockhands bowed as she passed.

"Do ye need me to show ye how to perform this work?" she mocked.

An auburn-maned youth snickered.

Marca confronted him. "I propose a contest. If ye can lift more than I, I will finish loading the cargo. If I lift more, ye will suffer the consequences of such disrespect."

One crate scarcely cleared the floor as the boy spent his strength. Marca raised a stack of three above her head with no difficulty.

"What's goin' on here?" groused Olial, having noticed his crew clustered around the spectacle.

"It seems, Foreman, this crew is either inexperienced or lazy," Marca commented.

Olial saluted. "I ask pardon, ma'am. These are day laborers. My regular crew is in Bay 14 off-loadin' a shuttle."

"Ye should know Lord Vader's orders take precedence over any other. Do ye need to be reminded of your priorities?"

“How can you speak to that man so?” rang in her brain.

She addressed the group, “Ye have until I return to finish this job, or ye all will suffer.”

Retracing her route to the passage, Marca’s fingers rubbed her medallion. To their own astonishment, the dockhands accelerated their momentum, and each was able to hoist two crates at a time.

On the observation deck, Darth Vader was not amused. He voiced his displeasure to Marca. “If you show weakness - the slightest indulgence - your subjects will never obey. The organ which beats in your chest merely provides blood to your limbs.”

“Forgive me, m’lord, but I was not finished with them. For delaying the repairs to your Star Destroyer, I intended someone to pay.”

Vader accompanied Marca into the hangar as the last man exited the vessel. Gershon Olial gulped when he saw the Dark Lord. This time, he had no savior.

“A point is best made when the person in charge is held accountable,” Vader advised his First Minister.

She gaped at that impenetrable breathmask. “...when Lord Vader demands that you kill your friends...” reechoed, accusing her.

“You do not condone such substandard results?” prodded the Sith Lord.

“No...”

Resigned, Marca confronted Olial. Green orbs begged for a reprieve as his throat constricted. Part of her wanted to laugh at his terror-stricken mien, but a seed of righteousness cultivated through many harvests vanquished the Dark Lord’s dominance of her heart. She deflected her energies toward Vader, whose black gloves groped at his studded collar.

The blue jewel ring and her lightsaber clattered at his feet. “I can be no less than I am, m’lord. Only the guilty merit Reparation, not the Stainless.”

With that, her right hand encircled the Maran pendant and she vanished.

Chapter 8

“Luke!” Marca cried across the galaxy. She huddled on the straw bed in the Old City hovel where she had spent her first night on Kinchenon. She suspected Vader would deem a search of the dilapidated structures distasteful.

Tossing and turning on his bunk, Skywalker bolted upright. Unfocused blue eyes scanned the gloom. For weeks, he had worried about her, dreamed of her. He had invoked Obi-Wan Kenobi’s protection for her. Luke had heard rumors from Kinchenon that she held an influential post. Rebel agents had been relaying developments on that planet with increasing frequency. General Rieekan had commented at a conference of senior officers how, if things continued to progress in such fashion, there would no longer be a need for the Alliance.

“Vader will still control everything,” protested Bonn Campbell.

“He will be powerless, so will the Emperor,” Keena Fairchild rebutted. “Marca will rule, and there will be a peace throughout the galaxy unlike any we’ve ever known.”

Luke had listened to this debate, unimpressed. He had been given his orders by Princess Leia: find Marca. He had been unsuccessful in reaching her.

Now, she might have been standing beside him. “Marca?”

“Vader is too stubborn to mend his ways. The Alliance must come, so the people will not suffer further.”

“Suffer?” echoed Luke.

“Ye must attack before the sun rises twice.”

As Luke reclined once more, he could almost see Marca in hiding. Had she come to her senses at last? Or was this a ploy to bring the Rebels within striking distance of Vader? Luke found himself in a state of confusion no one on Sarcon VI could alleviate. Could he trust Marca Regis?

Marca wondered who, if anyone, she could trust. She gazed out the clapboard dwelling’s window at a parade of green, furry creatures trundling westward. These were the Rolts whom she had encountered at the Tribunal and on the streets. Could their reputed disdain for the Empire be another weapon in this battle against the Dark Lord? She followed the stragglers entering a lopsided plank shed on the settlement’s edge.

A stooped, elderly Rolt intercepted her. “What can we do for you?”

“I seek your help.”

“We do not help humans. Humans have not helped us.”

“The Empire has not helped ye,” Marca countered, displaying her scars. “I am no part of that.”

“She not look like Rebel,” gibbered a youngster from a mat on the dirt floor. All present assessed her starched robe and scuffed sandals.

“I have suffered at the hands of the Empire, like ye. I need aid to create a diversion when the Alliance ships attack. Then, we will reap the fruits of the Empire’s Reparation.”

The elder Rolt studied her sallow features. “I believe you. What would you wish us to do?”

“I don’t truly know. A riot of some sort would draw the stormtroopers from the central defenses...”

“I would not ask it of my brethren. We have lost too many from the cold and the Empire’s tyranny. A riot would mean more widows and orphans.”

This lack of enthusiasm depressed Marca. “Have ye any suggestions, then?”

“Tell her about the guns!” shouted a young Rolt.

“There is a storage building to the north which the Empire uses as an armory. We had plans to steal the guns and take the New City.”

“Perfect!” Marca exclaimed. “We can coordinate the two forays...”

“There are too many guns to be carried. We have no transportation...”

Marca laughed. “Don’t worry, m’friend. I’ll have a ‘speeder here in two shakes. We can have the guns safely hidden before dawn.”

The Rolt grinned. “Thank you very much. We will meet here again when the moon rises.”

Marca accepted the creature’s enormous paw. “Until later, m’friend.”

“The name is Caulox.”

“‘Tis an honor meeting ye, Caulox. Good night.”

The group escorted her to the door with jabbered farewells. The evening cloudless, she strolled toward the New City to make good on her promise.

Darth Vader released his fury on those closest at hand. Five stormtroopers patrolling the docking bay crumpled to the floor after a lengthy search confirmed Marca had escaped the complex. Two aides on the observation deck felt their windpipes constrict to the point of death, and still the Dark Lord raved.

“She was mine!” he howled. “Never again will she be so vulnerable.”

A young lieutenant entered the bay, radiating eagerness. “Lord Vader, we have been informed the Rolts of Old City intend to raid the munitions warehouse at our northern outpost before morning.”

“Such trifles do not concern me.”

“But, my lord, Marca Regis will be with them!”

Vader cooled his pique. “I shall be there.”

“Master, we saw him leaving the Imperial building,” a scrawny Rolt declared. “He is the spy who has betrayed us to the Empire!”

Caulox frowned at the surly captive. “What have you to say, Laidus?”

“I did nothing disloyal, Master. I was summoned...”

“By the black lord!” blurted another adolescent.

“Hush! Go on, Laidus.”

“I was summoned by Captain Biard. The Empire is constructing a new settlement for us, and since I was once an architect...”

“Liar!” rippled through the gathering.

Caulox silenced the upheaval with a paw. “You know, Laidus, our brotherhood agreed to have no contact with the Imperials...”

“Master, I said nothing!”

“I hope not, my son. I hope we have been true to our cause.”

“We are! We are!” chanted the ensemble. “To the death!”

“An admirable army, Caulox,” Marca hailed from the portal.

Caulox smiled through green fur. “It may not be. We knew a traitor lived among us, and it seems to be my own nephew.”

Marca entered the house. “Postpone his Reparation ‘til our mission is complete. ‘Tis likely his misdeed may work to our advantage.” In the process of stealing a landspeeder from the Training Complex, she had commandeered the jumpsuit and boots of its unconscious driver. “If we can surprise the squad which will endeavor to ambush us, ‘twill mean fewer to fight later.”

Laidus shook off the paws of those restraining him. “You cannot! Our neutrality guarantees their clemency. If we fight...”

“They can’t be trusted, Laidus,” Caulox reasoned. “They will kill us, whatever we do. This way, we are one step closer to freedom.”

“Yes, Caulox,” concurred Marca. “And when the Rebels attack...”

Hysterical, Laidus interrupted, “The Rebels will never come! The Empire has the new gun in place. It will kill them all!”

Marca glowered at him. In her time spent with Vader, no mention had been made of any weapons other than lightsabers. “Show me this gun.” She tugged the renegade outdoors. “Caulox, have your brethren muster here, and be patient.”

Crouching in the ‘speeder, Laidus directed Marca through the bustling city. Beyond the gigantic obelisks, they came upon the largest ion cannon ever constructed. The weapon’s size spelled defeat for the Rebels.

Rejoining the Rolts, Marca applied herself to the matter at hand. “We’ll send a score or so to the warehouse to load the guns on the ‘speeder. If a detachment lies in wait, the others can incapacitate them.”

“How will we succeed against them without weapons?” babbled a tall creature.

“We’ll work as teams. One of ye will pull off the trooper’s helmet, and his partner will use a rock or club to strike down the man. If we hit them hard enough, they won’t recover for quite awhile.”

The furry beings cheered, which Caulox silenced.

“One more thing!” Marca added as they filed onto the street. “Pick up any stray rifles the stormtroopers drop. The more we have, the better our chances.”

The crowd trekked as one northward, appearing little more than a forest in motion, pursued by Marca in the ‘speeder. She parked in a willow grove near the bunker-like armory and leapt from the seat. Once they infiltrated the structure, the vehicle could be brought closer.

She encountered Laidus on the path. “Where is everyone?”

“Consulting Caulox about where to take the guns.”

“There’s no time for that. Come on, it’ll be daylight soon.”

They jogged toward the armory. Antilles and Mydian intercepted them, and the group hastened toward the edifice.

“It won’t take much to break the security code!” Marca yelled for any eavesdroppers to hear. “Go, tell the others to hurry.”

Mydian trotted into the underbrush. Seven more Rolts appeared. One clamored, “There’s been an accident!”

“Never mind that,” hollered Marca. “I’ve broken the code!”

The bushes rustled once, then again. It had begun. Caulox rushed to Marca with a rifle snatched from an early casualty, and she blasted the dual locks. The doors swung wide, and the green creatures advanced. Marca, however, sprinted off to assist the amateur warriors.

A shrill cry petrified her - someone in horrible pain. Hurdling vegetation, she discovered Mydian writhing on the ground and Fontis, Caulox’s son, dangling from a high branch.

“What happened?” she murmured.

“I was took helmets, Mydian hit with rock. Black man come. I took helmet, he so ugly! Mydian screech, I almost fall!”

“Black?” repeated Marca. “In this light, weren’t they...”

“No, no,” Fontis gibbered. “This one tall, black armor. Help me down!”

Marca caught the youth when he jumped, but his weight knocked her to the dirt. She grabbed a gnarled root, actually an Imperial helmet. One touch repulsed her. She pitched Darth Vader’s breathmask into the thicket. She and Fontis delivered Mydian to where the ‘speeder was being loaded.

“Is he all right?” queried Caulox.

“He will be,” Marca asserted. “Are ye set?”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

Marca reached into the pocket of her jumpsuit and passed the elder Rolt the cloth pouch retrieved during a previous visit to the Old City hovel. “There are 200 credits here. After the victory, have a round of drinks, on me.”

Caulox clutched the bag. “That we will do. Our toast will be to your long life and happiness.”

A barrage of laser fire disrupted the scene. “Get going, m’friend. The reinforcements have arrived.” Marca lingered while the Rolts cruised into the night. She darted for the trees as stormtroopers overran the clearing.

Chapter 9

“What you’re suggesting is very risky, Commander,” General Rieekan contended.

“It’s ludicrous,” injected Leia.

Luke argued, “Marca advised us to attack, and I have to believe she knows what’s best.”

“She’s a traitor!” the Princess steamed.

“How can she be a traitor when she still doesn’t understand what we’re trying to do?”

“Then, why does she wants us to attack?” came Rieekan’s calm riposte. “Our intelligence has verified the ion cannon emplacement outside Issle Tork is fully operational. We’d be annihilated.”

“She must have a plan to destroy it.”

Rieekan considered Luke’s rationale. The Rebel officer had dealt with Marca Regis on few occasions, cognizant of her simplistic outlook and hesitant grasp of fundamentals. Almost everyone who joined the Rebellion told of prior efforts to live - unsuccessfully - within the framework of Imperial oppression.

Could Marca’s escape to Kinchenon be such a deluded enterprise?

“Commander Skywalker,” Rieekan finally decreed, “assemble the squadrons.”

Leia exploded. “What?”

“I’m sorry, Your Highness, but Luke is right. Marca must know what she’s doing.”

The woman glared at them before striding from the chamber.

Marca meandered - tired, cold and hungry - in a downpour of bitter rain. She couldn’t locate her X-wing. Twilight provided little illumination, and a long flight to rendezvous with the Rebel fleet loomed on the horizon. If she didn’t start soon, she’d be caught in the midst of the attack.

Issle Tork’s buildings added a menacing aura to the haze as she cut across a field toward another clump of trees. She couldn’t hear the uproar of stormtroopers combing the streets for her. What she did hear was the slush of her sandals in the mud. She had retrieved her robe from the Old City hovel. Filthy though it was, it was comfortable.

Straightening after dodging a sagging branch, the X-wing’s tail section bumped her forehead. She patted the fuselage with a prayer of gratitude and scrambled into the cockpit. “Fire ‘em up, little one.”

The 'droid's comment was unintelligible; the translator had been disconnected. Marca recalled engaging the mechanism...

"Has someone been here, Artoo?" she inquired.

An affirmative whine.

"Vader?"

No response.

"Stormtroopers?"

Silence.

"Who, then?"

Artoo twirled his dome as if hunting for something. Marca followed his line of sight. A multitude of children had crept from the bushes.

The delegation astounded Marca. Ragged clothes adorned the tiniest urchin, the lankiest juvenile and all in between.

She clambered down the ladder. "What are ye small ones doing so far from the city?"

"We're waiting for the pilot," replied the tallest youngster. "Is he coming?"

"I'm the pilot of this ship, m'friend. Have ye been tampering wi' it?"

The smaller children averted their eyes. "Geeri tried to make it run so we could get away," a flaxen-haired toddler volunteered. "He didn't mean to break it."

"Why would ye want to take m'fighter?"

The eldest stepped forward. "We've watched our parents slaughtered like animals. We're next. We must get off this planet."

"Is the Empire responsible for this?"

"They took the older boys and put them in the funny white suits. Our sisters they..."

"Say no more. I can't take ye with me now, but in a short time, I'll be back wi' friends. Until then, hide yourselves well."

The rain ceased as the children scampered into the forest, smiles replacing their tearful pouts.

Marca inspected the damaged craft. "Artoo, can ye fix this?"

The silver and blue 'droid squealed. Indicator lights blinked and eventually the converters ignited.

"We've a job to do before we leave," Marca instructed her unit, settling into the pilot's seat. The canopy secure, she directed the ship west toward the ion cannon outpost.

A discordant alarm roused 25 stormtroopers from a stupor of inactivity. Spotlights pierced the dreary yellow sky. The ion cannon swung into position. Some of the soldiers manned smaller guns.

“One?” The duty officer did not believe the report. “One X-wing attacking this base?”

“With the First Minister at the helm, according to his lordship,” crackled through the headset. “The order is to shoot her down without killing her.”

“Shoot down the First Minister...” Such an idea was preposterous.

“Diving at 45 degrees!” shouted a stormtrooper armed with a pair of macrobinoculars. “She’s on a suicide run!”

It indeed appeared Marca intended to crash into the massive weapon. She was enjoying herself in the fighter; she had sent it into a spin at 10,000 meters and plunged straight at the cannon, to Artoo’s dismay.

“This will scare the armor off them, more than anything,” she predicted. “And when they abandon the other guns, I’ll have a clear target.”

Her speed exceeded safety limits as she pulled from the dive and skimmed ten meters above sloping terrain. Every stormtrooper ran for cover. The X-wing climbed; Marca cut the engines.

The ship stalled at 5,000 meters and banked left. The gunners were prepared for this second run, but she disabled the lesser weapons. Her port engine sustained a hit. She assaulted the ion cannon at point-blank range, aiming lasers at the exposed undercarriage. She veered off shy of impact. The explosion sent a mushroom cloud high into the atmosphere.

Marca had cleared the installation when it struck. A chunk of metal no larger than a fist, yet sufficient to wipe out manual override and sever communications with Artoo. She prayed her course to intercept the Rebel ships had been preset. If not, she would surely become lost in the depths of space.

An urgent chirrup woke Marca from an exhausted slumber. Artoo had restored communications, scrolling a list of problems down the screen faster than she could read them.

“We’re what?” she gasped.

Artoo repeated the series, slower.

Marca swallowed hard. “The wrong direction! How far?”

The ‘droid calculated.

“An asteroid belt? Shining stars, can it get any worse?”

The reply doubled her heart rate.

“An extra 27 hours to the fleet? Low on power? And a what?”

The scanner showed a Star Destroyer and patrol to port.

“Any suggestions?” she asked.

A detailed plan flashed on the screen.

“If ye say so, little one. I’m putting ye in charge.”

The guards felt the floor vibrate when the unseen X-wing landed in the Destroyer's docking bay. One boon of her training from Darth Vader: stabilizing her emotions allowed greater proficiency over the High Spirit's gift of invisibility.

Curious stormtroopers wanted to investigate, but their superior ordered them to maintain position. "We're going into hyperspace," he said. "Strap yourselves in at once."

Marca wasn't prepared for the jump. Artoo had warned her the Imperial ship had slowed to navigate the asteroid field and would resume light speed clear of the obstacles. She didn't realize it would happen so quickly.

The unsecured X-wing skidded across the hangar and smashed into a shuttle. The chain reaction wrecked a dozen TIE fighters. Artoo announced the Rebel ship had sustained no further damage, to Marca's relief.

Trouble lay ahead, nonetheless. Stormtroopers had heard the collision, seen its aftermath, heard Artoo's assessment. They were determined to find the source.

Marca listened while the disaster was conveyed to the bridge. A disgruntled lieutenant ordered debris swept from the area.

"Find a way to charge the engines," she whispered to her 'droid, alighting from the fighter. "And yourself. I think we'll play a little game of 'chase your tail' wi' our Imperial friends."

The layout of this craft was similar to Darth Vader's Star Destroyer, though on a much smaller scale. Marca skulked to the lift, and held tight as it transported her to the bridge.

As the doors retracted, chapped lips kissed her medallion. She observed the placid crew milling about, then descended to the split deck's lower level. The reflection in one monitor justified her faith. The technician assigned to that console swivelled his chair toward her.

"Your Lordship, I..." He fell to his knees.

Catching the title, adjacent personnel shuddered. Tow-headed Captain Montrose scurried from the decoding section and bowed to the illusion of black armor.

"We were unaware of your presence, Your Lordship," he oozed. "To what do we owe the honor..."

"Ye have permitted an intruder to breach your defenses," growled Marca. "She escaped from Kinchenon, and the Emperor has directed me to apprehend her."

"That would account for the disturbance..."

“Yes, Captain. I want every available man searching all decks.” She scowled at nearby conscripts. *En masse*, they migrated toward the lift. “When ye find her, I shall be interrogating her ‘droid in your chambers.”

“But, Your Lordship, we are scheduled to rendezvous with your ship to facilitate repairs...”

“That mission has been suspended. The Emperor himself awaits word of this child. Alter your course away from any inhabited systems. I don’t want her to escape me again.”

“Pardon, Your Lordship, but we are only an hour from Belinwacs. To change course now would mean dropping to sublight...”

“Do it, then.” Marca chuckled. Vader ruled an Empire of simpletons. She returned to the lift and, in moments, stepped onto the hangar deck.

Stormtroopers marched down the corridor, escorting a distraught R2-D2. Fearing nothing beneath the shroud of deception, she blocked their path, legs astraddle. “Whose ‘droid is this?”

“This is the unit we removed from the Rebel fighter,” answered the senior ‘trooper.

“Why are ye bothering with a hunk of scrap metal when we are slowing to sublight? To your stations, immediately! I will take charge of the ‘droid.” A simultaneous salute left Marca alone with Artoo. “What’s going on over there? Are they guarding the ship?”

A whistle confirmed her fears.

“Come on.” She preceded him across the docking bay.

Six stormtroopers flanked the X-wing. A faint glimmer made Marca smile; she pushed Artoo behind a Y-wing.

“Ye, there!” she bellowed, confronting the formation. “Strap yourselves in! We’re dropping to sublight.”

“But, Captain Montrose, you gave orders not to leave our posts,” objected one man.

“Nothing will happen during the jump,” was Marca’s logic. “Or would ye like to end up wi’ your skull shattered against the bulkhead?”

The squad trotted to seats on the far wall. Artoo rolled toward her and beeped in delight.

“I’m not smart, little one, but I’m not stupid, either.” She placed a bony hand on the ‘droid’s crown and fingered the nose of the X-wing. Concentrating, the three forms faded from view.

Marca loaded Artoo into his socket behind the cockpit and pulled a helmet over her shaggy brunette curls. Engines revved as the Star Destroyer broke to the lesser side of light speed, and they floated through the open doors.

Laser blasts accompanied their departure. Artoo reported no direct hits, and the Rebel cruiser *Justice* 50,000 meters to starboard.

“Cadet Regis, this is blue seven. Do you copy?”

Marca saw another X-wing streak past. She switched on the transmitter.

“Blue seven, I read ye.”

“Welcome home. You are to land on the *Justice* and proceed to the council chambers without delay.”

“I’m right behind ye.”

The hulking cruiser silent and dim, Marca intuited something amiss. She left the X-wing to seek out the council chambers, envisioning a deserted behemoth wandering the galaxy. These doubts persisted until sandy-haired Keena Fairchild signaled to her along the passage.

“We’re on silence alert while we pass near the Star Destroyer *Avenger*. We activated our cloaking device after you boarded. Your uniform for the hearing is in here.”

Marca sidled into the bunk room. A cadet’s dress attire lay on one bed. Polished black boots stood beside khaki trousers, a white high-collared shirt and khaki vest with insignia. She had never imagined anything so elaborate.

“I hope it fits,” Lt. Fairchild said. “It belongs to Bonn Campbell. He’s the skinniest man in the Alliance.”

Together they peeled off Marca’s tattered robes. A cursory glance at the teen’s multiple scars compelled Keena to shield her eyes. She discarded the old garment and handed her companion slacks and shirt.

Once dressed, Marca studied her likeness in an oval mirror. Would this be her final role? Dock laborer, First Minister of the Empire, destroyer of ion cannons; impersonating a Star Destroyer’s admiral, Darth Vader, and now a Rebel cadet. Would she ever wear her native robes in peace again?

Lt. Fairchild proceeded, gait brisk; Marca caught her near a fork in the corridor. While they walked, the alert was canceled and normal activities resumed. Had Keena not paused to speak with another crew member, she would have been maimed by the laser blast which tore through Marca’s midsection.

Chapter 10

The surgical 'droid had a delicate task mending Marca's ruptured organs. Her torso had been mutilated by the blast, and she would have died if not for Keena Fairchild's innate resourcefulness. Two pilots had been summoned from the galley; they carried Marca to sick bay. After an hour in a bacta fluid vat failed to repair the damage, humanoid 2-1B took up his instruments.

Luke and General Rieekan watched the procedure from the medical wing's gallery. They had been notified of the incident during a tactical briefing. Leia joined them. Artoo hovered beside C-3PO, the 'droid interpreter.

"Attempted murder!" muttered the gold-plated figure. "How can we hope to defeat the Empire when we war among ourselves?"

"I want the assassin found," Rieekan fumed. "Even if Marca is suspected of treason against the Alliance, no hearing has taken place. Whoever shot her took the law into his own hands. Such behavior is impermissible."

Two-Onebee spoke through the comlink. "General, extended bed rest is recommended before this patient can resume regular duty. Besides significant blood loss from these injuries, her skin bears scars from deep puncture wounds. There is also evidence of malnutrition."

The General turned to Leia. "We'll have to postpone the court-martial. Should we delay the attack?"

"We'll discuss it in council."

The group filed into the passage; Luke peered through the glass at the catatonic girl. He felt a now-familiar stirring... He trotted after the others.

"Artoo has been telling me about the ion cannon on Kinchenon," C-3PO was saying when Luke fell into step.

"What about the ion cannon?" questioned the Princess.

"Its impressive specifications would have assured victory for the Empire, had not Marca Regis destroyed it."

Luke asked, "She destroyed the gun?"

"Single-handedly, so Artoo reports. To coincide with our air offensive, she convinced the Rolts of the Old City to mount their own siege. If not for Lord Vader..."

"Vader!" exclaimed Leia.

"Yes, Your Highness. He is on the planet."

She reeled toward Luke. "I told you Marca couldn't be trusted."

"It's not that," Luke contradicted. "She knew Vader would be there. She tried to end his oppression of the people."

"Too bad she couldn't obey orders."

“If you recollect, I reacted the same way when I first met Vader. She doesn’t understand yet.”

“She won’t have the chance now, will she?”

“I resent that remark, Your Highness,” barked General Rieekan. “You, more than anyone, should refrain from passing judgement until the facts are disclosed. If the council finds Marca valuable, we may be lenient.”

“That remains to be seen.”

“You can’t mean that,” Luke pressed.

“You know I do.” With a flip of her brunette braids, the Princess continued, alone.

Luke and the General grimaced at each other. “Women!”

The assembly in the spacious council chamber snapped to attention when General Rieekan entered. He was followed by Luke and the ‘droids. Approaching an oblong table, Luke’s blue eyes widened at the sight of Marca, wrapped in a mauve sick bay gown, struggling to keep her balance in the second row.

“You’re supposed to be in bed,” he admonished.

“It seems I’m more eager for Reparation than ye are to perform the protocols.”

Rieekan exhorted, “It’s not wise for you to be here.”

Marca traced the pattern on her pendant. “M’Reparation to the Alliance is overdue, Your Worship.”

The General whirled toward his squat aide, Captain Luftin. “Tell the Princess we require her attendance.”

Twelve council members took their seats. Artoo rolled to Marca’s side; she patted the round silver dome. “I see ye survived, little one.”

Leia strode down the aisle, and the throng saluted once more. Marca clutched the arm of her chair, spasms cramping her abdomen. When the former senator of Alderaan reached the head table, the accused dropped onto hard metal.

General Rieekan called the session to order with a banging gavel.

“Contrary to my better instincts, we will take up the matter of Cadet Marca Regis. Threepio, read the charges.”

The tall ‘droid faced the gathering. “Cadet Marca Regis of Shin-mara is charged with unauthorized absence from the Alliance base on Sarcon Six. She is charged with the theft of an X-wing fighter, and a ‘droid belonging to Commander Luke Skywalker.”

Ebony-headed Captain Luftin interspersed, “A charge of treason has been added, General, as have three counts of consorting with the enemy.”

Rieekan addressed Marca. "You have heard the charges, Cadet. How do you plead?"

"To the first three: guilty, sir. I admit I am insubordinate and a thief. But I am not a traitor. Of the others, I am not guilty."

The spectators roared their disapproval. Rieekan raised a cautioning hand.

"Such is your right. Your Highness, have we permission to present the case for the Alliance?"

Leia Organa nodded.

Nathaniel Luftin directed his statement to the council. "We aim to prove to this august body that, 28 days ago, Marca Regis entered Imperial territory on Kinchenon and imparted particulars of the forthcoming offensive to Imperial officials and other unreliable parties. I call as witness: Commander Luke Skywalker."

Luke ascended the platform and swore an oath. At the council's behest, he expounded on his impression of Marca's attitude toward the Alliance.

"In training, Marca - that is, Cadet Regis - tried very hard to conform with regulations. She seemed to be advancing well until she visited my quarters that last night... I had received a new training schedule from the Princess, and we discussed it. She told me of transmissions throughout the Imperial fleet ordering her death. She mentioned plans to leave the base, despite General Rieekan's restrictions."

"This has been verified," Luftin interjected.

The General frowned. "Dispense with the dramatics, Captain."

"Your indulgence, General," droned Marca. "I've already admitted m'guilt in these matters. Luke knows naught of events on Kinchenon, and unless ye propose to call citizens of that planet, I'm the only one who can testify to what transpired."

Rieekan deliberated with the other councillors in hushed tones. "Very well. You may take the stand."

Luke vacated the platform as Marca hobbled forward. He sensed her physical and emotional torment - how could she bear such agony?

Captain Luftin instructed her to repeat the oath.

She refused.

Leia grit her teeth. "Are you showing contempt for this council, Cadet?"

"Not at all. But I can only swear by the High Spirit and that which I hold as truth. Otherwise, I'd be lying from the start."

Rieekan prevented the Princess from further provoking Marca. "Proceed, Captain."

"Cadet Regis, what was your motivation for going to Kinchenon without permission?"

Marca smoothed her crumpled gown, delaying while stabbing contractions tightened her chest. "I submitted m'self to Darth Vader for Reparation."

A wave of expletives arose from appalled Rebels.

"Silence!" Leia commanded.

"Isn't it true you were sent by Darth Vader to infiltrate the Alliance and dispatch confidential information to him?" probed Luftin.

"Just the opposite, Your Worship. Having seen people's misery under Imperial rule, I hoped m'compliance with the terms of the Nonviolence Pact would induce Darth Vader to use his power to ensure justice."

Ripples of sarcastic laughter reverberated through the arena.

"Did your plan succeed?"

"No."

"And did you not then become a passionate advocate of the very Imperial tyranny you claim you intended to subvert?"

"No!"

Punctuated by feeble respiration, Marca recounted her activities as First Minister of Kinchenon, head of the Imperial Tribunal, and her acceptance of the truth. She described the raid on the Imperial Armory and how the children had crippled her X-wing.

As her agitation with Luftin's hostility escalated, Luke noticed blood seeping through the sick bay gown's fabric. He rushed to aid her.

The movement distracted General Rieekan, who had been scribbling notes. He slammed the gavel. "Medic!"

Marca's wrath erupted at the interruption. She didn't know she was the catalyst of the upheaval. Confounded by the crowd's horrified expressions, dizziness overwhelmed her, and she slumped to the floor.

Two-Onebee could not pinpoint the origin of the hemorrhage. None of his sutures had burst; he prepared to reopen the incisions in search of internal damage. "When I'm finished, she must rest until completely healed, or she will die."

"Luke," said the General, "see to it a guard is posted at Marca's bedside at all times."

Marca overheard the conversation in a daze. Other sounds addled her brain. Faces appeared before her: Luke, Leia, Vader, and an unknown bearded visage.

"Who are ye?" she moaned aloud.

"In the past, I have protected Luke Skywalker. Now that shall be your duty."

"But, I..."

“Listen, child. Because of you, Luke may die on Kinchenon. His destiny lies elsewhere and, having interfered with history, you must restore the normal order before you die.”

“Tell me who ye are!”

“I am Obi-Wan Kenobi. I trained both Luke and his father in the ways of the Force.”

“Father?” Marca burred.

“Anakin Skywalker, a very powerful Jedi. You know him as Darth Vader. He will try to kill Luke.”

“Oh, Luke...”

“I’m here, Marca,” soothed young Skywalker.

Two-Onebee continued his ministrations. “She’s delirious,” he explained.

She groped for the Rebel’s hand. “Luke! I won’t let him kill ye! He can’t kill his own son...”

Luke covered Marca’s quivering mouth. How could she know? Her power was extraordinary, still...

She bit his hand. “I’ve seen Kenobi. He told me... about ye.” She raised herself on the gurney. “M’Reparation has come. Take the medallion. He cannot kill ye while ye wear it.” Her voice grew hoarse. “Oh, Luke, remember ye are his blood!”

Those present froze when Marca drooped in his arms, her features hideously contorted. Two-Onebee swivelled toward Luke, who embraced her desperately. Leia moved from the doorway to comfort him. General Rieekan sniffed audibly.

Chapter 11

Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker and General Rieekan mourned over mugs of ale in the cruiser's galley. Luke blamed himself; Rieekan regretted not confining Marca to quarters under guard after her earlier surgery.

A bridge officer delivered the hourly update. "We are in range of Kinchenon, General. Should I transmit the attack code?"

"There's plenty of time, Major."

Stocky Captain Luftin hailed the General from the bar. When the latter rejoined his compatriots, grey eyes betrayed total outrage. "Marca's body has disappeared from sick bay."

Leia choked on her drink, a dribble staining her white jacket. Luke cursed. Rieekan ventured, "We can't concern ourselves with it now. The squadrons are waiting. Your Highness, we are needed on the bridge."

Luke forced overpowering grief into his subconscious. If Vader is on the planet, I'll kill him - to avenge Marca. Tucking the sunburst beneath his jumpsuit, he cut through the congested hangar and crawled into his X-wing. Artoo had already been secured in place; all systems checked.

With gold squadron, Luke saw another pilot sitting in Marca's fighter. This would have been her first battle. A pang wrenched his stomach.

He remembered how Obi-Wan Kenobi's physical shell had vanished when Darth Vader's lightsaber robbed him of life. Could the same have happened to Marca?

He had no time to dwell on such contingencies. One by one, the fighters were launching. Each squadron formed their wing, orbiting Kinchenon, anticipation high. When the battle authorization crackled through the pilots' headsets, they swooped on Issle Tork, a flock of predatory birds. Hearts pounded as they raced through dense, ochre clouds.

Leia and Rieekan monitored the descent from the bridge. Blue squadron bombarded the Imperial Administration Complex and some minor gun emplacements on their initial run. Regrouping east of the city, three of Luke's men were fatally hit.

"Blue leader to blue four," Luke shouted. "What happened?"

"I copy, blue leader. It's an ion cannon, and it's enormous!"

Red squadron sped through the settlement, wreaking havoc with every blast. Four of those ships were lost in the same sector.

Caulox and his brethren converged on the New City, ready for the Rebel blitz. They seized the moment, butts of their laser rifles crushing their oppressors' craniums. After years of domination, the Rolts were taking no prisoners.

Mydian, Antilles, Fontis and Laidus were among those poised outside the Administration Complex when Rebel lasers pulverized the west face. Panicked stormtroopers and their officers had no opportunity to escape. They were cut down like grain as they fled the ruins.

Darth Vader viewed the chaos from the Imperial Medical Annex. Luke Skywalker led the aerial assault, he knew, but stirrings within the Force failed to indicate the miracle worker's presence. The Emperor would not be pleased if she had fled beyond his grasp...

Gold squadron commenced a strafing run. The Training Complex was demolished; two fighters sustained damage.

Above smoky clouds from the burning city, the squadron leaders debated strategy. The battle would be theirs if that ion cannon could be eliminated.

"My Artoo was with Marca when she knocked out the other gun," Luke postulated. "He can program the routine into my system so I'll make a direct hit."

The others wished him luck. His 'droid hiccoughed at the suggestion of enduring another unorthodox foray on a well-guarded outpost. "You'll regret it," blinked on Luke's translator.

The ship passed through the mid-morning overcast. When Luke relinquished control, the X-wing fell into a wild spin. He doubted Artoo's wiring as they neared the ground, then skimmed above a regiment of 'troopers, masks in the dust.

They climbed, engines dead. The craft banked after stalling, and Luke found himself plunging toward the ion cannon. Artoo squealed, translated, "Target in range: five seconds."

Luke squeezed the trigger. Laser bolts assailed the weapon's casing, denting but not penetrating. He couldn't risk another pass; the converters thrust him upward, accompanied by fire from smaller guns. He burst through the clouds, temples throbbing.

"What went wrong, Artoo? What did Marca do differently?"

"Blue leader, do ye copy?"

Luke opened a channel. "This is blue leader. I copy." He did not recognize the hoarse croaking, and assumed it was one of the new pilots.

"'Tis a flaw in faith which obscures your vision of the flaw in the ion cannon. Never trust a 'droid to do a human's job."

Luke acknowledged the insult. "You're going on report as soon..." His tongue numbed. Who else could possibly know... He reversed course as the rogue X-wing spiraled down. His hand stroked the medallion through the cloth of his uniform. "Marca?"

"Keep your distance," that unfamiliar voice advised. "When these monsters blow, it gets right messy."

Luke observed the maneuvers. The fighter sprayed soldiers with its lasers, then circled and blasted the ion cannon. The ensuing mushroom showered most of the city with shrapnel.

Vader gripped the windowsill when the shockwave reached Issle Tork's central sector. He saw scrap metal chunks raining upon the Medical Annex and mumbled profanity. It was the end of the Empire on Kinchenon.

In the glass, a darkly-robed image wavered before him. An ample hood concealed its wrinkled mien. Withered hands flexed, as much an indication of anger as if that face were visible. Yellow, uneven teeth flashed.

"You have failed again, Vader," rumbled the holographic Emperor. "First the son of Skywalker, now this child. You could have eliminated her, but you were afraid."

Vader genuflected on one knee. "I, my Master? I only tried to win her to your cause. She was more vulnerable than Skywalker; she was..."

"You are a fool. If Marca Regis' power merges with young Skywalker, you will suffer for it. You shall not leave Kinchenon until he is dead."

"It shall be done, Master."

As the hologram faded, the Dark Lord subdued his terror. He had been commanded to annihilate Skywalker, and no compromise would be tolerated. He trudged through the door, formulating a plan.

X-wings landed on Issle Tork's main thoroughfare. Squadron leaders were carried on the shoulders of their men to the front steps of the crumbling Administration Complex.

Caulox and a crowd of Rolts welcomed them.

"For giving us freedom, we thank you." Caulox scanned the pilots' faces. A quizzical expression altered his smile. "Is not the one who helped us among you?"

Luke stepped forward, realizing who the creature meant. "I'm sorry to say she is dead. She does deserve credit for this victory, though. Without your assistance, our success would not have been possible."

Caulox unfastened a jangling pouch from his belt. “She asked that we toast our freedom when battle was done. Come, we will raise our glasses to her memory.”

The allies paraded en masse to a cantina, unscathed by the campaign. Farnok Gill manned the bar, and mugs were filled. Soon the establishment teemed with good cheer and rang with laughter. Five Rebels picked up abandoned musical instruments on the stage, spurring others to dance. The commotion was muted, however, when General Rieekan, Princess Leia and other senior officers appeared in khaki dress uniform. Mugs slid under tables while the assembly was subjected to a harsh visual inspection.

“I am disappointed,” chided Rieekan. “What a disgraceful way for loyal members of the Alliance to spend an afternoon!” He smirked deviously. “Why wasn’t I invited?”

Farnok served the group drinks. Caulox rose from a bench, mug in hand, and gestured for quiet. “To Marca Regis. Long may she live in our hearts!”

Glass and metal clinked together in tribute. Marca so honored, the clamor intensified. General Rieekan and Leia occupied rickety chairs with Luke and Bonn Campbell. The pilots were already intoxicated, yet their manners held under the scrutiny of the brunette Princess. It was business-as-usual with her.

“Drown your sorrow,” stammered Skywalker, froth flecking his thin lips. “The girl’s gone. Vader’s gone. There’s nothing to stop us now.”

“That remains to be seen,” Leia retorted.

“Your Highness, please,” censured Rieekan. “We deserve this celebration. Marca would have wanted it this way.”

The Princess repressed a sob. Excusing herself, she hurried outside, leaning against a battered edifice. As she tried to stifle the tears, a hand on her shoulder dried the stream instantly.

A swarm of children had surrounded her. A lanky teen spoke. “We didn’t mean to scare you, ma’am. We saw the ships, and we need to find the girl pilot.”

“Girl pilot? I don’t...”

“The one who flew the ship with the funny ‘droid in it. Like those.” A boy of no more than six pointed to a cluster of X-wings.

“You mean Marca? Curly hair, thin...”

“Yes! Is she here? She promised...”

Leia dabbed moist cheeks with her shirt sleeve. “Come with me.” She walked toward the cantina, tiny feet scurrying to keep pace.

Luke tapped Bonn’s arm and nodded at Leia crossing the cantina’s threshold with the youngsters. “Well, Your Highness, rounding up new recruits?” joked Campbell.

Leia crinkled her pert nose. “These children are looking for Marca. They must be the ones who tried to steal her ship.”

Luke stooped to ruffle one toddler’s tawny locks. Abruptly, he stiffened. “I’ll be back.” He brushed past his comrades and trotted over the threshold.

Leia and Rieekan herded the children toward a table and offered them fruit juice. The Rolts played with these descendants of a generation which had treated them well. The music, conversation and laughter distracted the youngsters as the celebration escalated.

Sunlight angling through the windows, General Rieekan noted the time. He mentioned to the Princess, “We should be getting back to the *Justice*. I suggest we put the little ones on the command shuttle and send a patrol to find Commander Skywalker.”

“As you wish.”

Chapter 12

The Rebel cruiser awed the 28 children. Princess Leia answered questions while leading them to the council chambers, which would provide temporary housing until the ship returned to Sarcon VI. The eldest, 15-harvest-old Geeri, assisted the woman in shepherding the tykes; unsupervised for so long, they had become rather undisciplined.

On the bridge, General Rieekan's boot tapped a martial rhythm. If he had to interrogate every person aboard, he would unearth who murdered Marca Regis. He was also exasperated by news no one had located Luke since his sudden exodus from the cantina.

Keena Fairchild arrived for her shift in Navigation.

Rieekan drew her aside. "Someone has taken Marca's body."

"Who would do such a thing?" The lieutenant's nose twitched.

"I wondered if you had any ideas. You were there when..."

"But, sir, I didn't see anything. I was talking to Yeoman Perchek. Didn't Marca say anything before she died?"

"No." Rieekan reviewed the facts with her. "We couldn't have a lunatic on board, could we?"

"I hope not, sir."

He shrugged. "Who were the first ones to respond after the incident?"

"Bonn Campbell and Farnok Gill. They came from the galley."

"You saw no one else in the vicinity?"

"Princess Leia. But she didn't stop."

Rieekan returned to the command console, frustrated. He would never suspect Leia, rudely though she treated Marca. Bonn Campbell was an introvert, capable and harmless. Farnok Gill had been with the Rebellion from the start - a loyal pilot.

He must consult the Princess. Perhaps she had seen something... anything. Marca was dead and missing, Luke's whereabouts a mystery. He had to tie up these loose ends before his best, most unorthodox people were lost.

Geeri and his sister Renata huddled at Leia's feet while she told the story of a courageous smuggler she had once known. Other children were asleep on cots when the General entered. Renata tugged the leg of Leia's white uniform, whining for more.

"Later, honey," murmured the Princess.

Rieekan escorted her into the passage. "Keena Fairchild told me you were nearby when Marca was shot. Did you see anyone?"

Her brow furrowed. "I passed two pilots headed toward the docking bay. Both men had sidearms secured in their holsters."

Rieekan slouched against the bulkhead. "I don't know what to do. If Marca had lived, she could have identified the culprit. The hit was so direct, she must have seen him."

"I've an idea," stated Leia. "Ask Luke."

"Good idea," he concurred. The bond between the two young Rebels might include such knowledge. "Now all I have to do is find *him*."

She stared after him as he marched along the corridor, glancing at the sleeping children, before heading toward the shuttle bay.

Issle Tork's sole intact cantina hummed with life. Rebels, Rolts and laborers filled the tables, thankful for the freedom to speak and behave as they chose. Dancing, drinking and raucous conversation abounded.

Farnok Gill participated fully in these activities. He and Bonn Campbell had finished their latest patrol and were ready to enjoy themselves. Two mugs of ale and a shot of Alderaan whiskey, however, put Farnok in a combative mood.

He set his sights on a comely young woman socializing with Caulox, Fontis and Mydian. Farnok asked her to dance; her refusal did not deter him. He returned in five minutes with the same request. She declined again, infuriating the pilot. He grabbed a delicate hand and dragged her onto the dance floor. Perceiving he was drunk, the woman tried to extricate herself calmly, but it was too late.

Mydian approached the couple and separated them. The muscular Rolt attempted to soothe Gill; the Rebel elbowed him in the abdomen.

Five burly locals accosted Gill, ushering him to the street. "Return to your command post," advised one.

Infuriated, Farnok whisked past them and lunged at Mydian before he had a chance to resume his seat. Bonn Campbell intercepted him.

"That green traitor isn't gonna push me around!" Gill wailed.

Mydian spun. Caulox laid a restraining paw on his arm. "Do not listen. He is intoxicated."

"But the honor of our brethren..."

"No, Mydian. The Alliance knows of our honor. He is trying to provoke you."

The young Rolt jerked free. "He has succeeded."

Farnok Gill was yanked off his feet and thrown against the bar. Rebels nearby hollered at Bonn to halt the fight.

"He deserves whatever he gets," snorted Campbell.

Gill pounced on Mydian, fists flailing. The Rolt sent him reeling with a kidney punch, the pilot bent double. In excruciating pain, Gill drew his blaster.

Silence enveloped the gathering.

Bonn sidled toward him; Farnok pivoted. "Back off. This fuzz-ball's gotta die like the rest of the traitors."

"He's not..."

"He's as naive as those who fancy the Empire will capitulate peacefully. Like Marca Regis."

"You killed Marca!" Leia proclaimed from the cantina's doorway.

Farnok fired at her and splintered the framework. He was knocked unconscious by Fontis; Bonn Campbell pried the blaster from his hand.

"Take him to the ship," the Princess told two pilots. "Bonn, round up some men. We're going to find Luke, wherever he is."

Chapter 13

He loitered beneath an ancient willow, cape undulating in the wind, lightsaber in hand. Black armor glistened in the afternoon heat. He watched Luke traverse a field of wildflowers.

The Dark Lord shuddered - that gold sunburst hung around Luke's neck. If the miracle worker's power had already come to rest on the boy, this could be a difficult task.

Still, Skywalker had not perfected his skills. He tended to become reckless when enraged. Vader could use this to his advantage.

Footsteps were audible now. Steady, deliberate. Luke was prepared, or was he?

"Do you dare discover the truth?" drifted on the breeze.

A stone flew at Luke from tangled weeds. He snared it barehanded and tossed it aside, fingering the handgrip dangling from his utility belt. For Marca, he vowed.

"The miracle worker is dead?" queried the Sith Lord.

"A martyr in the quest for justice."

Was it a laugh the Rebel heard escape the ominous breathmask? "Your 'martyr' may well have been a murderer."

"Liar!" Luke countered.

"The galaxy's ancient history chronicles how the Councillors of the High Spirit executed those who did not adhere to their fanatical Nonviolence Pact. They were tyrants in their own right, and your miracle worker numbered herself among them."

Luke's knuckles whitened as he ignited the blue laser. "She could have killed you many times, but didn't. That task has been left to me."

Vader aimed a reddish beam at his adversary. Blades crossed; for a time, they were evenly matched.

Luke noticed, however, the medallion bobbing atop his uniform distracted the Dark Lord. Had Marca intimidated him to the point her death did not diminish his fear?

The Rebel's tactics incorporated this probability. He hacked at Vader, fierce blows barely deflected. Then, as if someone clouted him from behind, Skywalker faltered.

Vader advanced. "Why do you stop? It is indeed justice that you kill me!"

Luke twirled his saber; Vader flinched. The Rebel sprang forward, at the same instant his blade deactivated itself.

“The Alliance will not condone it if you have mercy on me, Skywalker. Or are you softening, like the miracle worker?”

“Don’t you see what’s happening?” spat Luke.

“I see very well.” Vader’s lightsaber would have decapitated Luke had the Rebel not dodged the slice. The left sleeve of his uniform scorched; he reignited his weapon and accelerated the battle.

Frantic swings propelled Vader up a rutted slope. He had been caught off guard by the vicious offensive. Luke pelted the breathmask and metal leggings. The Sith Lord howled.

Annoyed, he straightened to his imposing height. “Enough child’s play!”

Luke kept his wits; he parried every strike and managed a few more swift cuts. Briefly, their feet remained planted on the verdant green.

“The miracle worker has come to your aid, Skywalker,” breathed Vader. “Were it not for that, you would already be dead.”

“Dead or alive, we will vanquish you. Because our bodies do not hold life does not mean you are safe.”

“I am more powerful than all the Jedi and the Councillors of the High Spirit combined. I will prevail!” He brought his blade around hard, wresting Luke’s lightsaber from his hand.

Luke made no attempt to reclaim the handgrip. He scowled at the figure looming above him and guffawed. Something paralyzed his muscles. He didn’t wish to die, but he couldn’t move.

Vader’s temper flared at such defiance. He would have ended the conflict, had not gloved digits been pinned to his sides.

“Your control of the Force is exceptional,” he praised.

“I’m not doing anything,” confessed Luke, still chuckling.

Both men were liberated from their unseen shackles at the same moment.

Vader slashed at Luke’s blond head while the Rebel vaulted for his weapon. Sparks crackled from the fused metal casing. Useless.

Skywalker drew his blaster, which was wrenched from his grasp with a flick of Vader’s finger. The Dark Lord brandished the red beam.

Grab the lightsaber! rasped within Luke’s mind. Grab Vader’s lightsaber!

“What?”

Obi-Wan’s voice assured him, “If you trust the Force, you will not be harmed.”

The young man had yet to conquer his skepticism of the unknown, and as he surveyed the instrument of destruction, his stomach knotted. Trembling fingers stretched toward the shining blade, but soon withdrew.

Darth Vader snarled. “The miracle worker was not afraid when death threatened. I misjudged your power. Nothing can prevent your demise.”

Luke steeled himself against the impending blow. The tip of Vader’s laser perforated his jumpsuit; he bit back an obscenity. Flesh sizzled, and he crumpled in a heap.

“Too bad you could not be swayed from your simplistic beliefs,” lamented Vader. “You would have been an asset to the Empire.”

He ripped the braided chain from Luke’s neck and mashed the pendant underfoot before taking aim.

An iron hand whipped him around so the blade struck earth beside Luke’s body. The Dark Lord did not recognize the emaciated countenance and brown curls in oversized Rebel uniform, but the energy surging through him elicited an oath from his breathmask.

“Ye cannot kill your own son, Anakin,” Marca Regis warned.

Her presence and her words perplexed him. The lightsaber sailed into the trees before he could strike.

“I could have predicted you had role in this,” scoffed Vader. “You lied to me. You are not human.”

She cuffed her sleeves, exposing scars from the bed of nails, and partially unzipped her jumpsuit to display blood-soaked bandages wrapping her torso. “If I am not human, why have I shed m’blood in the name of peace?”

“You do not fight by human standards.”

“Standards ye can defeat,” she corrected. “Ye should not have taught me so well.”

“I could defeat you at any time.”

“Using human standards?”

Vader hesitated. Renounce his superiority against this apprentice? “Yes.”

“So be it.” Marca snatched Luke’s handgrip, ignoring the flying sparks, and activated it. She pointed the blade skyward. “For Anakin Skywalker, once a good man.”

The Dark Lord retrieved his weapon, and laser swords crossed. The setting sun over the northern hills painted the clearing in pastel hues. Marca agilely wielded the lightsaber; Vader fended off her onslaught with difficulty.

“Your skill proves you have learned much, child,” he wheezed.

“I have learned nothing. Violence is for savages and imbeciles. Anyone can fight. It takes skill to keep the peace.”

A precise strike tore Marca’s left arm from shoulder to wrist. No outcry escaped the pursed lips, though blood pouring from the gash awed her. She had lost so much of that lifegiving fluid, how much longer could she survive?

Her musings offered Vader an unimpeded sweep at her midsection. She parried at the last moment.

“Ye are too confident, Anakin. Weak of body I may be, but I’ll hold m’own.” She drove him down the grassy incline.

Luke’s blue eyes fluttered and strained to focus on the skirmish. He failed to raise himself, instead flopping in the dust.

“Skywalker will die whether you triumph or not, child,” Darth Vader portended, having detected the movement.

“I will die before either of ye.”

The Sith Lord blocked her cuts and slashes, breastplate heaving. Contrary to the periodic rashness exhibited during her training, no unnecessary motion hampered her technique.

He could not know Marca had intentionally altered her style. Not just her life hung in the balance, but those of citizens throughout the galaxy. This was no adventure.

Her blade contacted Vader’s armor, slicing into his ribs. As his yowl rent the wilderness, her resolve evaporated. She retracted the weapon and pitched it into the high grass.

“What is wrong, miracle worker?” Vader puzzled, hooking his handgrip beneath the flowing cape.

Marca shivered as a gust chilled her. “I came here to shred ye to pieces. But I still believe harming people - friend or enemy - is wrong.” She clutched his arm. “Ye must stop this insanity.”

A tremendous shock jarred every component of his circuitry. The Dark Lord glared at her entreating violet eyes. “I should have destroyed you when first our destinies crossed. You are a fool.”

“Ye could rule the galaxy wi’ justice; what compels ye to do otherwise?”

“I am obedient to the Emperor. His bidding is law.”

Marca languished, “Who is the fool? Your heart is a rock. I could melt that rock, but I am tired and the High Spirit calls me home. Leave me to die in peace.”

Vader supported her when her knees buckled. An uncommon tenderness tinged his voice. “Return with me, miracle worker. We can overthrow the Emperor and free the people from their enslavement.”

“M’Reparation consummated, ‘tis no hope for me. Go, or be sent.”

Considering these choices, Vader contemplated the shattered fortress of Issle Tork. “The Emperor commands...”

“Hang the Emperor, then, and ye beside him. I showed ye leniency before, but no more.”

Skeletal fists were thrust skyward. As she knelt, Vader ignited his lightsaber. Beheading would be a suitable death for this traitorous imp.

The blade arced. Two soiled palms encircled the glowing laser. This defense did not faze the Dark Lord, until a debilitating current raced up his arms. It tingled, it seared, and he was powerless. Every inch of his broad frame yielded to the dreadful affliction.

Nor could his mind resist this diminutive opponent. Faces of every being he had mistreated swirled before him, including Luke, Leia, Gershon Olial and ObiWan Kenobi. Marca's own spiritual torment subjugated his emotions. Then, he glimpsed a reflection of his own anguished soul in her dilated orbs. He blasphemed the Force, releasing the weapon.

"That won't help, m'lord." Marca scolded, the handgrip bouncing at his feet. "Ye will find no consolation until the day ye die."

Vader conceded. "Your faith has served you well, miracle worker. But we shall meet again."

"Not so. Your Reparation will come at other hands. I am called to the High Spirit's domain." She beckoned fiery hail to speed his retreat. When he had disappeared from view, she sank on the ravaged hillock, futilely sifting the dirt for her medallion.

Menacing clouds obliterated the sun while Luke and Marca sprawled on the battlefield. Pummeling rain bathed the site of blood and footprints. A sharp crack of thunder roused Luke; he was drenched. He didn't think he could grovel to the shelter of the huge willow.

He struggled to gain some stability, tripped and tumbled in the mud. Marca's groan was muffled by the relentless downpour.

Creeping gingerly, he found the obstacle in his path. He groped the soggy lump, determining it was not Vader. Who?

Luke towed Marca to the tree. His power lamp nonfunctional, he searched for a pulse in the gloom. He felt a faint heartbeat through repulsive stickiness. A distinct gnawing at the base of his neck confirmed his suspicions.

Darth Vader, Scourge of the Galaxy, had been bested by a mere youth. How valuable she would be for the Alliance.

"Marca!" He shook her. "Can you hear me?"

Breathing labored, her hand fumbled for his. She gurgled, "Luke, are ye all right?"

"How did you get here?" he prodded.

"Obi-Wan told me I had to save ye. Once more, I shirked m'duties."

“Don’t be absurd. Vader’s gone; we’re alive. Issle Tork isn’t far. We’ll make it.”

“I can’t walk, ye can hardly stand; we’ll make it,” she retorted.

They laughed feebly.

“We have the Force as our ally,” said Luke. “We’ll survive.”

Marca squinted against a flash of lightning. Her entire body ached. When Luke hoisted her off the wet grass, she squirmed. “Put me down!”

He set her upright; she swayed. He tottered and fell, resources totally drained.

Marca viewed her companion’s agony. She jiggled his harness to keep him awake, probing jagged lacerations. If he didn’t get immediate treatment, no amount of bacta fluid would save him. Disregarding her own misery, she rubbed; his disfigured tissue mended. Listlessly, he patted her hand.

“Better?” she asked.

His eyes peered through her.

Marca turned to the bearded spectre of Obi-Wan Kenobi hovering above the wildflowers. She quivered.

The Jedi-robed elder grinned. “You have done well, child, but your task is not complete. You must get Luke to Issle Tork by sunrise, or he will die with you.”

“Obi-Wan, I cannot. The High Spirit calls...”

“Help us, Ben!” shouted Luke. “She doesn’t have to die!”

Kenobi pondered the pair. “Do you wish my aid, child?”

“I can no longer do it alone.”

The Jedi caressed her cheek. A flood of hope swelled within her. “As you value the freedom of the galaxy, go quickly!”

Kenobi vanished; Marca bent to Luke. She lifted him from the muck and, gripping him around the waist, commenced the trek to Issle Tork. Impenetrable thickets and steep gullies made the journey rough. When they stumbled, Luke moaned. Her own distress increased with each step.

Rain buffeted them. Ultimately, they sank amidst trampled undergrowth. Hours elapsed before Marca and Luke recouped sufficient strength to plod onward.

The storm gradually slackened. Marca distinguished city lights ever closer; she sighed. It was then she twisted her ankle on a knobby root and plummeted into the river. Luke dropped on the bank, screaming her name against the wind.

Chapter 14

A rustling across the water prompted Luke to yell louder. When Leia Organa and the five Rebels reached him, he babbled incoherently. By chance, Bonn Campbell located Marca's body; she had cleft her head on a boulder in the shallows. He pulled her ashore.

"By the stars, Marca! How did you get here?"

Violet eyes registered nothing, though she recalled the voice. "Bonn, don't ever die. It hurts to die."

"Don't you think it hurts to live?"

A dripping hand hushed him. "M'time has come. Would that I'd used m'blessings more wisely."

"Would that I had been cursed with your power," grumbled Bonn. "Things would have been so different."

"Make peace with your people, m'friend, and work for justice. 'Twill make the most difference."

Marca's fingers slipped onto her chest. Bonn tramped to where Leia nursed Luke, who had regained his senses after ingesting the contents of Leia's canteen.

"Luke, Marca is dead."

Leia bristled. "Marca is *here*?"

"She saved my life," mumbled Luke.

"But, how? She died on the *Justice*. We *saw* her die."

"All I know is: she saved my life."

A sickly radiance illuminated the meditation sphere's interior. Despite the solitude, Darth Vader could not think. The pain had dissipated from his limbs as he fled Kinchenon for his Star Destroyer; the memory tortured him yet. He saw old priorities in a haze.

His latest audience with the Emperor had been a disaster. The aged ruler had expressed dismay at the Sith Lord's incompetence, and spoke of patience wearing thin. Vader begged for forgiveness, though in private, he couldn't be sure of future success. He realized Marca Regis had invaded his *sancto sanctorum*.

"Ye must leave it behind, Anakin Skywalker." The insistent contralto scathed his soul. "Ye have not known peace since your son became a Jedi, and even this chamber is no haven from the truth. That rock within ye *is* melting. The Emperor cannot touch ye if the decision is made now."

He eyed the unsullied white image, confounded. Her drawn features, so transformed from the vibrant youthfulness he had initially encountered, unnerved him. He was trapped between her wizened smile and the Emperor's frown.

“If ye do not accept,” Marca continued, “m’bond with Luke will only amplify his faith. As his father, ye know what that means.”

“You cannot do this, miracle worker,” growled Vader.

“Ye tried to goad Luke to the Dark Side, as well as m’self. Now ye know how it feels to doubt.” She saluted in Maran fashion. “Anakin, ye were a good man, but Reparation is inevitable.”

A black glove floated toward her. Other phantoms muddled his thoughts; his arm sagged. “Be gone, miracle worker. What will be, will be.”

“Just remember: Luke is your son. Protect him.”

The apparition dispersed. Darth Vader knew he would not find rest until death claimed him. The module parted, and he sought the activity of the bridge.

In a rock-hewn antechamber, her body lay in state. Evacuation of Sarcon VI in progress, there would be no time for the customary burial. Clothed in a lieutenant’s uniform, two citations were pinned beside her gold medallion.

Luke paced near the dias, tears blurring his surroundings. Random crew members stepped in to pay respects; no one spoke. Leia brought General Rieekan’s summons.

“We need witnesses when Gill signs the confession,” she explained.

In the command center, a small group had gathered. Sober, Farnok Gill refused the pen. “I didn’t kill anybody!”

Bonn Campbell intervened. “Sir, I..”

“Lieutenant, please,” protested Rieekan. “I know you were present when Gill admitted to shooting Marca, but if he’s a true patriot, he’ll sign of his own accord.”

“But, General..”

“I’ll be forced to dismiss you if you say another word.”

Campbell pressed, “I can’t let an innocent man be charged with a crime he didn’t commit. I shot Marca Regis.”

Luke couldn’t believe it. He and Bonn had been friends since training. He’d always followed orders to the letter, without the slightest deviation. “Why?”

“Before joining the Alliance, I studied galactic history. Marca traveled from our distant past...”

“Time travel?” disputed the General.

“No. A collection of fragmented writings from this quadrant outlined how those she referred to as Faithless had devised primitive technology for orbital flight. Luke rescued her from what was actually an experimental craft in which they planned to hurl a man into space to see how long he could survive.”

Leia hissed, “Nonsense!”

“Not at all. The occupant would be in stasis, requiring neither food nor liquids. In this instance, the auxiliary engines may not have fired, and the pod impacted too far away to mount a recovery mission.”

“Are you saying Marca never left her own planet?” Rieekan snapped.

“That’s right, General. At least, not until recently.”

Luke noted, “Bonn, Marca told us Shin-mara thrived on agriculture...”

“In her day, yes. A revolt by the Faithless deposed the Councillors of the High Spirit, presumably decades after Marca’s family line ended. Their technology ruined the soil, the populace eventually died of starvation. What we call Jemeier became a global swamp.”

“That doesn’t justify killing her.”

“She would’ve devastated our ranks. I saw others embracing her ideals, and this High Spirit she preached would’ve warped us into pacifists.”

“Marca was no pacifist,” declared Luke.

“She was still young and impulsive, but much too powerful.”

“What about Gill’s statement?” Rieekan inquired.

“There was no ‘statement’. He saw Marca as a danger, like I did, and we’d discussed the very course I chose. Princess Leia misinterpreted his words, that’s all.”

Campbell was conducted to a detention cell. The General glanced at Luke, whose blue eyes gazed through the walls. Before an objection could be articulated, the pilot rushed from the chamber. Rieekan slumped in his chair and scratched his greying head.

Mounting steps by twos, Luke shoved aside the heavy stone door to the planet’s surface. He burst into sweltering heat, scanning craggy peaks. “Marca, no!”

“Fear not, Luke,” came the gentle breeze. “‘Tis in your hands now. The High Spirit has called me home.”

“You can’t abandon us. There are too many questions unanswered.”

“Ask them, m’friend.”

“I held you when you died. How did you survive?”

He heard her snicker. “An exchange was made. When a councillor dies, his greatest wish is granted. Mine was to return home. Since that was impossible, I agreed to give your Alliance an opportunity to have a home. That meant fulfilling Obi-Wan’s edict to preserve your life. I could not reveal m’self to anyone, until the very end.”

“But Vader...”

A vague shimmer lingered above the rocks. "He can no longer call ye by name, except in terror. He knows his fate." She wafted closer. "M'time is past. 'Tis one last request I have: find a way to get m'body off the planet."

A transport launched behind her. "I may not have time..."

"'Tis Maran tradition, Luke. We believe a soul descends from the realm of the High Spirit at birth, and is reabsorbed after life on the physical plane. For most, 'tis the one occasion their body leaves the surface." The vision grew transparent. She saluted. "Ye were m'second family, and I held ye in great esteem. I wish ye peace and joy. Good-bye, m'friend."

Another ship skirted the horizon. Luke returned to the depths of the mountain, an odd pounding in his skull. He found Leia and the General in the command center.

"Feeling better, Commander?" Rieekan asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Can you handle the last transport?"

Luke nodded.

"Good. Collect your gear; the crew is aboard. We'll see you on the *Justice*."

Strolling toward the bunk room, the blond pilot passed sick bay. He paused on the threshold. Two-Onebee was assembling supplies. "Good morning, sir," the 'droid greeted.

"Morning." Luke felt uneasy addressing the humanoid medic. "Are the cremation facilities still operational?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fetch Marca Regis' corpse, then, and take care of it. Send the ashes to my transport when you're finished."

"Yes, sir."

Luke proceeded along the corridor. The bunk room appeared victim of a whirlwind. His comrades had packed in haste. He changed into his flight uniform and stuffed his few belongings into a duffle. The hike back to the hangar seemed endless.

Two-Onebee awaited him at the foot of the transport's ramp, a corked beaker on a metal tray. Inside the container, Luke saw a mound of ashes and Marca's gold pendant.

"It did not succumb to the heat, sir," the 'droid responded to the pilot's arched eyebrows. "I am not programmed to theorize."

Relief brought a smile to Luke's lips. At least, he would have one memento of his association with that unique female. He toted the makeshift urn aboard.

Cargo and passengers were secured for departure. Command center personnel transmitted clearance as Luke strapped himself in. Engines roared; the oblong craft rose into the atmosphere.

Medallion tucked in his breast pocket, Skywalker entrusted Marca's remains to the garbage chute, ejecting the open beaker beyond Sarcon VI's gravitational range.

His co-pilot surreptitiously observed this activity. "What was that all about?"

"Just bidding a friend farewell." Luke stroked the carved sunburst.

As Marca's being commingled with the universe, that last evidence of her existence disintegrated in his hand.