

CHAPTER TWO



THE CRAWL SPACE UNDER THE MINING OPERATIONS COMPLEX HAD BEEN tricky to find. It had been even trickier to get into, and it had been trickier still to find the right junction box.

But it had been worth it, Han Solo decided with satisfaction as he poked his probe around the tangle of wires. Even with the dirt and the heat.

Even with the company.

“Han?” Luke Skywalker murmured from behind him—for at least the fifth time. “How’s it going?”

“It’d go faster if I didn’t have to keep stopping to answer your questions,” Han growled, easing a group of wires aside with his probe. The kid was good enough in a fight, but he had a bad habit of talking too much when he was nervous.

“Right,” Luke said. “Sorry.”

Han grunted, blowing a drop of sweat off the tip of his nose as he pushed his way past another knot of wires. Why Imperials couldn’t keep their wiring nice and neat and easy to track through was beyond him. Not a Hutt’s curse worth of pride in their work.

Still, if the workers had had any pride, they probably wouldn’t have put a nice convenient junction box down here beneath the complex’s reactor heat exchanger where anyone with half a brain could get to it. In which case he and Luke would have had to do this the hard way.

"I just wanted to remind you that I'm ready whenever you are," Luke said.

"Great," Han said. "I'll let you know." There it was: the junction he was looking for. Keeping the other wires out of the way with his probe, he maneuvered his jumper clip into the gap. A little delicate maneuvering, a little gentle touch . . .

And without even a spark, he had it sealed.

"Also, Leia just called," Luke continued. "She said we're pushing the timing here—"

"All done," Han said, easing the probe back out of the box.

"Great," Luke said.

And with a sudden *snap-hiss*, the blue-white blade of his lightsaber flared into the narrow crawl space.

"Hey—*watch* it!" Han snapped, flinching back from the blade hovering way too close over his head and arm. "I said it's *done*."

For a moment the hum and blaze of the lightsaber continued to fill Han's ears and eyes. Then, to his relief, the kid finally closed it down. "I thought I was supposed to take care of the alarm and lock once you found the right junction," he said, an edge of not-quite accusation in his voice.

"Sure, if you don't mind everyone knowing someone with a lightsaber was messing around down here," Han said.

"Maybe they'll blame Vader."

"Funny," Han grunted. "A lot of people have seen you running around with that thing, you know. And not just Rebels. Anyway, it's done—I hotwired around it."

"Oh," Luke said, and as Han's eyes recovered from the lightsaber's glare he saw an uncertain frown on the kid's face. "So why am I here?"

"Maybe Leia didn't think I should be out at night without supervision." Han pulled out his comlink and flicked it on. "This is Solo," he said, identifying himself. "You're clear."

"Right," Princess Leia Organa's voice came back, the word sharply clipped, her tone no-nonsense and business-like.

But Han could read beneath the tone. Whatever she said, whatever she did, she was crazy about him.

He was pretty sure, anyway.

“Now what?” Luke asked.

“We get out of here,” Han said, stuffing his tools back in their pouch and closing the junction box cover. “I just hope whatever they want in there is worth all this.”

“I hope so, too,” Luke said. “We really need a new base.”

Han frowned. “They’re looking for a new *base*?” He nodded upward toward the building above them. “In *there*?”

“Yes,” Luke said, sounding surprised. “Didn’t Leia tell you? It’s a mining clearinghouse, with records of all the major mining operations in this part of the Empire.”

“I know what it is,” Han said patiently. “I thought we were looking for some bulk cruisers or ore carriers we could grab.”

“That’s the cover, sure,” Luke said. “But that’s just to leave a false trail. The real plan is to download a bunch of locations where mining operations were started but abandoned. Leia thinks that—”

“Yeah, I know what she thinks,” Han growled, wiping irritably at the sweat on his forehead. “A place with no mining usually means there’s nothing else worth grabbing, either, which means no one wants the place.”

“That’s what she said,” Luke confirmed. “Sorry—I thought you knew.”

“I guess not.” Han jerked a thumb back along the crawl space. “Go on, get moving.”

The trek back down the crawl space was just as long, hot, and dirty as the inward trip had been. Finally, they reached the access point. “Too bad Chewie was too big to fit in the tunnel,” Luke commented, grunting as he pushed up the access cover and maneuvered it off the opening, letting in a rush of cool night air. “If he’d come with us instead of Leia—”

“Quiet,” Han interrupted, pushing up beside him and listening hard. Somewhere in the near distance he could hear the whine of an approaching landspeeder. “Out of the way—out of the way.”

“What is it?” Luke asked, pressing himself against the side of the tunnel to let Han past.

“Security patrol,” Han said, easing his head up out of the opening. The narrow alleyway they were in was about two hundred meters long, squeezed in between two windowless walls and lit by half a dozen pole-mounted glow panels spaced along the sides of the buildings. The distant

whine was getting louder, which meant the security patrol was getting closer.

The crucial question was, was it heading *toward* the building Leia and the others should be leaving right about now? Or was it headed *away* from them?

There was no way to know. But this was no time for taking chances. “Give me your lightsaber,” he said, pulling himself out through the opening.

“What?” Luke said. “But—”

“Give it to me and then get out of there,” Han snapped. “We need to make a distraction.”

Reluctantly, Luke unclipped the lightsaber and held it up. Han snatched it out of his hand and ran to the nearest of the light poles, peering at the lightsaber’s grip. If he remembered right, the activation switch was right *there* . . .

With its usual *snap-hiss*, the blue-white blade appeared. Gripping the weapon with both hands, making sure to keep the blade pointed away from him, Han braked to a halt by the pole. If this was a standard design, the power conduit should run right up through the center. Setting the tip of the blade against the housing, he gave it a firm push.

And with a small flash of yellow-white, the glow panel above him went dark.

“What are you *doing*?” Luke gasped.

“Getting their attention,” Han told him, glancing back over his shoulder. The landspeeder still wasn’t visible, but it was getting louder. “Come on,” he added, heading away from the sound at a quick jog.

“First close that down and give it back to me,” Luke said, running beside him at a cautious distance. “You’re going to get one of us killed.”

“I got it under control,” Han assured him.

“Now,” Luke said firmly, starting to reach out a hand and then apparently thinking better of it. “Come on.”

Han rolled his eyes and shut off the weapon. “Fine—you do the next one.”

“Okay,” Luke said taking the lightsaber and sprinting toward the next light post.

He had reached it, and had just ignited the weapon when the security landspeeder swung into view at the other end of the alleyway. “Han!” Luke bit out.

“Yeah, I see them,” Han growled, snatching out his blaster. “Get that light out.”

His answer was another brief sizzle as the glow panel overhead went dark. The landspeeder had meanwhile turned into the alleyway, and in the glow of the remaining light panels Han could see there were four men in the vehicle. Lifting his blaster, he carefully lined up the muzzle on the landspeeder’s front left edge and fired.

With a gratifying crackle of metal and plasteel, the landspeeder dropped onto its side. There was a brief earsplitting screech as the vehicle’s edge scraped against the permacrete, and then all four passengers were dumped out as the landspeeder made a hard left and slammed nose-first into the building on that side.

“Go!” Han ordered Luke, turning and sprinting toward the other end of the alleyway. If they could get out before the men back there pulled themselves together and called it in, they should be able to get back to Leia and the airspeeder before reinforcements arrived.

They’d made it halfway to the far end of the alleyway when another landspeeder blew into sight directly ahead of them. It wobbled slightly and then braked to a halt across the opening, blocking their escape.

“Han?” Luke called.

“Yeah, yeah,” Han said, skidding to a halt and wondering what they were going to do this time. Hitting the forward power coupler like he had with the other landspeeder wouldn’t do any good now that the thing was already stopped and its occupants were climbing out. There was no cover anywhere nearby, and no way out.

Unless Luke could cut a new door for them with his lightsaber. “Luke—”

“No, *behind* us,” Luke cut in.

Han twisted around. Their airspeeder had appeared behind them, burning through the alley with its stabilizer wingtips running bare centimeters from the walls. Hanging half out one of the side doors, his hairy arms stretched down toward them, was Chewie.

“Get ready, kid,” Han said. Spinning back around toward the security

men forming up behind their landspeeder, he fired off a few shots to keep them occupied and then stuck his left arm straight up into the air. This was probably going to hurt.

An instant later Chewie's hand closed around his forearm and yanked him straight up off the permacrete.

There was a muffled yelp from Luke as he was similarly grabbed. Clenching his teeth, squinting his eyes against the sudden windstorm in his face, Han fired off a couple more wild shots at the security guards. The airspeeder swung over the guards and the landspeeder and Han felt himself swing to the side as the pilot made a sharp left around the side of the building. Fumbling his blaster back into its holster, he squeezed his eyes shut, wondering if Leia was going to make them ride like this all the way back to the rendezvous point.

Then, abruptly, his body swung forward as the pilot slowed, his stomach lurching as they dropped back to the ground. His feet touched permacrete—

“Get in!” Leia snapped as Chewie let go of his arm.

Ten seconds later they were back in the air, now with Luke and Han safely inside. “What in space was *that* all about?” Leia demanded as Han rubbed his shoulder.

“I heard a security patrol,” Han told her. “I thought it'd be a good idea if they didn't know about the evening's company.”

“So naturally you start waving blasters around.” She transferred her glare to Luke. “*And* lightsabers.”

“You're missing the point, sweetheart,” Han said calmly. “Okay, so they know we were in the alley. But thanks to us, they *don't* know which building you were in.”

Leia opened her mouth . . . closed it again as she apparently got where he was going. Knowing which of the complex's buildings the intruders had invaded would considerably narrow security's search for what they'd been up to. “There are still only four buildings whose alarms you could shut off from that alleyway,” she said stubbornly.

“And they don't know which of the four it was,” Han repeated patiently. “*And* they didn't get to see which door you came out of, either.”

Leia's face darkened. She'd lost this one, and she knew it. If security had spotted the team leaving, it would have not only told them which

building to focus on, but also given them a clue as to which *part* of the building they'd been in. This way, they would have to search everything.

"That's okay—you don't have to thank me," Han said into the stiff silence. "Luke and I are part of the team."

He looked at Luke, but the kid was keeping exceptionally still and quiet. For that matter, so were all the others.

He looked back at Leia, to find that she'd turned away from him and was staring out the side window. And was also being still and quiet.

The trip back to the rendezvous point was a *lot* longer than the inward trip had been.

At least General Carlist Rieekan was happy. Not that Han would have cared much if he hadn't been. "Excellent work, Princess," the general said, nodding to her and sweeping his eyes approvingly around the rest of the group gathered at the table. "Well done, all of you. With Vader breathing down our necks, we desperately need to carve ourselves a little breathing space. Hopefully, one of the planets on this list will fit the bill."

He picked up the handful of data cards, fingering them as if they were some kind of anti-Vader Jedi magic. "That's all for now," he said. "Your individual commanders will have your next assignments. Princess Leia, Skywalker, I'd like you to stay behind a moment. The rest of you, dismissed."

There was a general scraping of chairs and feet as the team left the table and headed for the door. All, of course, except Leia and Luke.

And Han.

Leia seemed to be the first one besides Rieekan to notice that Han was making no move to leave. She gave him a puzzled look, then a frown, and finally a glare. It was on the glare that Luke also noticed Han's lack of movement, though all he did was look puzzled. Chewie gave him one of those what-are-you-doing-now sort of looks, but left without saying anything.

Rieekan, predictably, didn't react at all. He waited until everyone else had left before speaking. "Is there a problem, Solo?" he asked calmly.

"I'm here for the extra meeting," Han told him, just as calmly. "I thought I was part of the team."

Rieekan nodded. "And you are."

"So let's get on with it," Han said, folding his arms across his chest.

For a moment Rieekan eyed him in silence. Then, gesturing Han toward a door at one side of the conference room, he stood up. "Will you two excuse me a moment?" he said. "Solo and I need a word in private."

Han had been on the receiving end of enough reprimands during his time in the fleet to know that this one was likely to be a Class A windstorm. But to his surprise, Rieekan merely let the door slide shut behind them and raised his eyebrows. "All right," he said. "Let's hear it."

A straight-up question, Han decided, deserved a straight-up answer. "I wasn't told what the real mission tonight was," he said. "I didn't *not* understand. I was deliberately not told."

"Would knowing we were looking for a new base have made a difference in how you handled your part of the job?"

"My part, probably not," Han conceded. "But it could have made a big difference in Leia's. I know something about mining operations, and there are a few tips I could have given her."

"Such as?"

"Such as to stay clear of anything that smells of Hutt," Han said. "And I don't just mean places with *Hutt* in the name. There are at least fifteen different covers and shells they like to use."

"That's good to know," Rieekan said, nodding. "Maybe you can help the analysts sift through the data once it's been compiled."

"That's not the point," Han growled. "If I'm going to be part of this Rebellion thing, I need to be kept up to speed with what's going on."

"You think that, do you?" Rieekan asked.

"We just agreed I'm part of the group," Han countered. "What do I have to do? Become an officer?"

Rieekan looked him straight in the eye. "Basically, yes."

Han stared at him. The question had been one-third rhetorical and two-thirds sarcastic. Rieekan's response had been neither. "You're kidding."

"Not at all," Rieekan said. "You were in the fleet—you know how this works. The upper ranks get the data and the authority to make decisions. The lower ranks get just enough of both to do their assigned tasks."

"Fine," Han growled. "So how do I get the big rank bars?"

“You know how that part works, too,” Rieekan said. “To be a leader you have to lead.”

Han snorted. “Now you’re flying in circles.”

“Not really,” Rieekan said. “Lower ranks get limited data and authority, like I said. But they also have limited responsibility. Leaders don’t have the luxury of passing the blame elsewhere.”

“I’ve led teams before,” Han reminded him. “That Shelkonwa thing, for one. Luke and Chewie and me did pretty good on that one.”

“And you’ve done well on teams with Princess Leia, too,” Rieekan agreed. “But all those people are friends, or at least associates. People you know and trust. They’re not a group of soldiers or pilots whose strengths and weaknesses you don’t know and can’t compensate for. Soldiers you have to order into a battle, knowing full well that some of them—maybe even most of them—are going to die.”

Han felt his stomach tighten. “Yeah. That’s the hard part, isn’t it?”

“It’s the worst part of all,” Rieekan agreed quietly. “There’s an old saying—I don’t know where it comes from. Jedi, probably. It goes like this: ‘The choices of one shape the futures of all.’ Ever heard that before?”

“Everyone’s got a version of that one,” Han said. “Doesn’t mean a lot.”

“My point is that true leaders are fully and constantly aware of that fact,” Rieekan said. “They understand the possible consequences of their decisions, and are willing to bear that weight.” He cocked an eyebrow. “The question is whether that’s a step you’re willing to take.”

“So you’re saying you want me to be an officer *and* a leader?” Han asked.

To his mild surprise, Rieekan not only didn’t take offense but even chuckled. “Point taken,” he conceded. “I’ve known a few officers who weren’t leaders. And some leaders who weren’t officers.”

For no particular reason Han’s mind flashed to those five rogue stormtroopers who’d helped him and Luke get Leia off Shelkonwa. The head of that group, LaRone, had definitely been one of those rankless leaders. “So what now?” he asked.

Rieekan shrugged. “You go off and think about it,” he said. “Because I want you to be *very* sure you’re ready before you make the commitment.”

Han nodded. “Fair enough.”

“Good,” Rieekan said. “In the meantime, it occurs to me that there may be a part you can play in the mission I was going to discuss with Princess Leia and Skywalker. You’re welcome to sit in and make comments and suggestions.” He gestured. “Shall we go?”

Luke and Leia were still sitting quietly when Han and Rieekan returned to the main conference room. A third person had also joined the group: a grim-faced man probably twenty years older than Rieekan, with the broad shoulders and chest of a former rink fighter and what looked like a permanent downturn to the corners of his mouth.

Who had, maybe not coincidentally, taken the chair Han had been sitting in earlier.

“Ah—Master Axlon.” Rieekan greeted the newcomer with a polite nod. “Thank you for joining us.”

“My apologies on my tardiness,” Axlon said, nodding in turn. “My meeting with Mon Mothma ran longer than anticipated.”

“That’s all right,” Rieekan assured him. “May I present Master Skywalker and Captain Solo. Princess Leia you already know, of course. This is Vestin Axlon, former governor of Logarra District on Alderaan.”

Han grimaced. An Alderaanian. No wonder the man had a permanent sour on. “Pleased to meet you, Governor,” he said.

“It’s *Master Axlon* now, Captain Solo,” Axlon corrected darkly, his mouth turning down a little more. “*Alderaan*. You *did* hear about Alderaan, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I heard about it,” Han said, annoyed despite himself. “Matter of fact, I was the first one on the scene after Tarkin hit the place.”

Leia stirred in her seat. “Han,” she murmured warningly.

“That’s all right, Your Highness,” Axlon said, a ghost of a smile briefly turning his mouth upward again. “Yes, I remember now where I heard your name, Captain. My apologies. We owe you a great debt.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Han said. At least *someone* appreciated him.

“If you’ll take a seat, Solo?” Rieekan said, gesturing to the chair beside Axlon.

“Sure,” Han said, pulling out the chair beside Leia and taking that one instead. “What’s going on?”

“Actually, we’re not sure,” Rieekan said, resuming his seat at the head

of the table. “It’s either a great opportunity or an extremely obvious trap. Master Axlon?”

Axlon cleared his throat. “A few days ago I received a communiqué from Governor Bidor Ferrouz of Candoras sector,” he said. “I’m sure a seasoned traveler like Captain Solo knows all about Candoras, but for the rest of you it’s an Outer Rim region that edges into Wild Space and sort of trails off into the Unknown Regions. Under the Republic it was considered something of a bulwark against potential threats from both those areas. Under the Empire —” He made a face. “It’s apparently considered expendable.”

“Since Governor Ferrouz’s communiqué arrived we’ve been working our usual information sources, trying to learn everything we can about the situation out there,” Rieekan said, touching a key on his control board. The table’s holodisplay lit up, showing a portion of the Outer Rim and a small, ragged-edged sector bordering on the blank area of Unknown Space. “As Master Axlon indicated, Candoras is far from the mainstream of Imperial life and commerce, with a sector fleet consisting of four antiquated Dreadnoughts and some smaller ships, and limited resources of all sorts.”

“Unfortunately, they also seem to have an alien warlord named Nuso Esva edging his way along their border,” Axlon said grimly. “According to our sources, Nuso Esva has already conquered a number of systems in the Unknown Regions and is thinking about adding some Imperial territory to his collection. Candoras, apparently, is number one on his list.”

“So what does this have to do with us?” Han asked.

“What it has to do with us, Captain,” Axlon said heavily, “is that Governor Ferrouz is offering a very intriguing deal: a full-fledged base for the Alliance, complete with logistical support, docking facilities, and one of the finest natural supply depots in the galaxy —”

“Wait a minute,” Luke interrupted, his eyes wide. “He’s offering us a *base*? Not just an anchorage or hiding place, but an actual *base*?”

“That’s what he says,” Rieekan said. He manipulated the controls, and the holo zoomed in on a single star and then on a double planet circling that star. “This is the Poln system, Candoras’s capital. Poln Major, the larger world, is the actual seat of government. The smaller world, Poln

Minor, used to be a center of mining and manufacturing, and while its significance has decreased over the years it still has a fair role in both areas. That's where he proposes we establish our base. I've already confirmed that the system has enough ship traffic to disguise our own movements."

"Poln Minor also has a network of deep caverns and abandoned mining hubs," Axlon said. "Some of them are being used as storehouses, but others are empty and would be ideal for caching our own equipment." He gestured. "That's what I meant by a natural supply depot. A few of the caverns are just under the surface, but others are deep enough to be completely hidden from any external scan."

"Sounds ideal," Leia said. "What does Governor Ferrouz want for all this generosity?"

"According to the communiqué, nothing," Axlon said. "He assures us we'll be safe, protected by his sector fleet, and more than welcome. He also hints that he's planning to secede from the Empire in the near future and throw his official support to the Alliance."

Han snorted. "Like we haven't heard *that* one before."

"Granted," Axlon conceded. "And no one's saying that we necessarily believe him. The point is that we've been offered a base where, if nothing else, we'll have plenty of warning before a major attack."

"The question is, a major attack by whom?" Leia asked. "I assume it's obvious to everyone that Ferrouz is angling to have Alliance firepower on hand to bolster his defenses if this Nuso Esva character tries to move against him."

"Or like you said, it could be a straight-out trap," Luke said. "The minute we settle in, fifty Star Destroyers show up and we're caught like womp rats."

"That's certainly a possibility," Axlon agreed. "But it may surprise you to hear that I think the odds of that are fairly small. Our sources say Ferrouz petitioned the fleet for more warships about four months ago and no one even bothered to respond to his request. All indications are that Imperial Center has largely forgotten Candoras even exists."

"Besides, if they wanted to lay a trap for us, there are more likely places to do it," Leia commented. "Someplace with a decent sector fleet, for

starters. Getting a strike force to Candoras would mean shifting and retasking a lot of ships. That would take a lot of time and effort, and be pretty obvious to our spies.”

“So instead we move in and get hit by Nuso Esva,” Han said. “Not sure I see how that gains us anything.”

Axlon turned a scowl toward him. “Captain—”

“It gains us in two ways,” Rieekan interrupted. “First, if the presence of an Alliance force makes Nuso Esva reconsider his invasion plans, that risk goes completely away. Second, if Nuso Esva *does* attack, our forces may be able to help Ferrouz beat him back.”

“Since when did we start doing the Imperial fleet’s job for them?” Han asked.

“Since the ultimate goal of the Rebellion is to free the galaxy,” Rieekan said with an air of strained patience. “It wouldn’t be much of a victory if we overthrew one tyrant only to have him replaced by another.”

“Is Nuso Esva *that* powerful?” Luke asked.

“We have no idea how powerful he is,” Axlon said. “All we know is that Governor Ferrouz is clearly concerned.”

“Let’s talk about Ferrouz for a moment,” Leia said. “What do we know about him?”

“Ten years ago he was considered an up-and-coming young politician, one of the brightest to have come out of Imperial Center over the past decade,” Axlon said. “He’s young, barely into his forties, with a wife and a six-year-old daughter. He’s also apparently an excellent administrator.” He shrugged. “Unfortunately, that’s all we know.”

“Which is why someone has to go out to Poln Major and actually meet the man,” Rieekan said. “Mon Mothma and I think a small group could slip in without any difficulty—”

“*Wait* a second,” Han interrupted. “You’re sending Leia into danger *again*?”

“As it happens, no,” Rieekan said calmly. “Master Axlon has volunteered for the negotiator’s position.”

Han looked at Axlon, feeling the unpleasant sensation of the deck dropping out from under him. “Oh,” he said lamely.

“The original plan was to fly him to Poln Major in one of our trans-

ports,” Rieekan continued. “But I’m thinking now that you and the *Millennium Falcon* would be even better.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Axlon said, eyeing Han thoughtfully. “With the deterioration of Poln Minor’s mining infrastructure over the past few years, a lot of smugglers and other criminal types have taken over significant parts of the planet. You would fit right in.”

Han grimaced. Didn’t the Alliance know *any* other smugglers they could use for these things? He opened his mouth to point that out—

And only then did he spot the look on Rieekan’s face. A cool, measuring, judging look.

“Sounds wonderful,” Han growled. “When do we leave?”

Rieekan turned to Axlon. “Master Axlon?”

“I’d like one last brief talk with Mon Mothma to clarify a couple of our negotiating boundaries,” Axlon said. “After that I’ll be ready to go.”

“Fine,” Han said, standing up. “I’ll go find Chewie and see what it’ll take to get the *Falcon* ready.” He headed away, slapping Luke’s shoulder lightly in passing as he headed for the door. “See you, kid.”

He ignored Leia completely. Not that she probably noticed.

The meeting had ended, and Luke was heading down the corridor when he heard a voice from behind call his name. He turned to find Axlon hurrying toward him. “A word, if I may?” the older man said.

“Sure,” Luke said, frowning. He wasn’t very good yet at sensing moods and emotions through the Force, but even with his limited skills Axlon had struck him as an odd mixture of icy calm and burning passion. “Is there something you need?”

“As a matter of fact, there is,” Axlon said as he trotted to a halt. “I want you to go to Poln Major with me.”

“I appreciate the invitation,” Luke said. “But you heard General Rieekan back there. I’m on first-wave fighter duty.”

“Which would be a complete waste of your talents,” Axlon scoffed. “The Alliance has any number of men and women who can fly transport escort.” He lifted a finger. “But it has only *one* Jedi.”

“I’m hardly a Jedi,” Luke said. “Not yet.”

“But you’re the closest we’ve got,” Axlon persisted. “That makes you someone I very much want beside me when I sit down to talk with Governor Ferrouz. Not for defense, but for psychological insight.”

“If you want insight, you’d do better to take someone like Admiral Ackbar,” Luke said. “Even Leia’s better than I am.”

“Both of whom are busy with assignments of their own,” Axlon said firmly. “Don’t worry, I’ve already talked to General Rieekan about this—that’s why I stayed behind just now. He said that if you’re willing, you can go with me.”

Luke pursed his lips. Though he would never have said so aloud, he’d been less than enthusiastic about having to stay behind and put together an escort for the first Alliance forces into Poln Major. Especially when Han and Leia had been given much more interesting assignments. Going in with Axlon would definitely be a step up. “If the general’s game, I guess I am, too,” he said.

“Excellent,” Axlon said. “One more thing. I want you to come into Poln Major independently of Captain Solo and me. A wild card, as it were, in case Ferrouz’s offer isn’t what it seems.”

“Oh,” Luke said, his growing excitement taking an unpleasant power drop. Even with the *Falcon’s* many quirks, he always enjoyed flying aboard her, especially when she was working well and Han was in a correspondingly good mood. And Chewie was good company. “So I’ll be coming in one of the Alliance’s other freighters?”

“No, no,” Axlon said. “You’d be coming in one of our Z-95 Headhunters.”

“A Z-95?” Luke echoed, feeling his eyes widen. “Isn’t that a little obvious?”

“Not at all,” Axlon assured him. “Z-95s are a common enough sight in that part of the galaxy. A couple hours’ work to get rid of the Alliance markings, swap out the ID transponder for one with a copy of the safe-conduct code that Governor Ferrouz gave us, load the hyperdrive course, and you’ll be all set.”

“I suppose,” Luke said, his enthusiasm dropping another few points. Alliance Z-95s had perfectly capable hyperdrives, and even though they weren’t equipped with astromech droids they could comfortably hold the settings for a trip to and from the Poln system.

On the other hand, X-wings weren't exactly designed with long-range travel in mind, and Z-95 cockpits were even more cramped. "If you really think that's necessary."

"It is," Axlon said firmly. "So that's settled. Good. I don't know how long Captain Solo will take getting his ship ready, but I don't want you too far behind us."

"*Behind* you?" Luke said, frowning. "We're not even flying in convoy?"

Axlon shook his head. "As I said, Z-95s are common enough, but they're usually with private security firms that only fly escort for liners and other top-end ships." He considered. "Besides, it might be best if Captain Solo didn't know you were coming along. The more freedom of movement you have, the better."

Luke thought back to Han's reaction in the crawl space when he'd found out that Leia hadn't told him the true nature of their information raid. "That might not be a good idea," he warned. "Han likes to know what's going on."

"Captain Solo is a soldier," Axlon said, his tone cooling. "He gets to know what's necessary for his part of the mission. No less, no more."

"Sure, I understand," Luke said. "But in Han's case—"

"And we really don't have time to discuss it," Axlon interrupted. "I've alerted the mechanics to start removing the markings, but I imagine you'll want to supervise the ID swap-out procedure personally. Good luck, and I'll contact you once we're on Poln Major." Without waiting for a response, he gave Luke a brisk nod and walked away.

Luke watched him go, wincing. Despite its downsides, this was definitely a more exciting mission than the one he'd originally been given, and he was grateful to Axlon for getting it for him. But Han wasn't going to like being left in the dark twice in two missions. He was likely to not like it very loudly, and probably with a blaster close to hand.

And it occurred to Luke that Chewie wasn't *always* good company.

But Axlon was right. This was war, and they all had to do what they were told. Han would get over it.

He hoped.