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Incident at Nijmegen

by [Joyce Yasner](#)

It was doing the casualty reports that depressed Piett: so many young men dead, and for what? To wrest a glacier-locked world from the rebel Alliance? He had ordered their dead brought back aboard, unable to bear the thought that hundreds of years from now, unless some native Hoth wildlife got them, the bodies would remain as they had fallen, perfectly preserved in the sub-freezing temperatures, a testament to the Emperor's implacable will. They had more than enough stasis boxes, God knew: two thousand for a crew of twelve thousand; some bureaucrat had calculated the mission fatality rate at over fifteen percent. Piett hadn't been able to work up the courage to venture below decks to see the canisters in their racks; it was enough to know that they were down there.

And enough to know, at this moment, that Vader had tried to forestall the killing. One of the perks Piett enjoyed in his new job as admiral was access to all the ships' computer files, and he had taken advantage of it in the wake of his predecessor's death. Oh, he had known the superficial details of the Hoth campaign before Ozzel bought it. Vader had planned to send a commando team down to blow the rebels' power generators by stealth. By bringing the fleet out of hyperspace within distance of the rebels' scanners, Ozzel had ruined Vader's plan and given the rebels time to mount a defense. Ground actions were notoriously expensive in men and materiel, and they had paid accordingly. Had the commandos succeeded, Vader could have negotiated Skywalker out, promised the rebels rescue if they turned over the object of his obsession. Given Vader's ruthlessness, Piett would have expected him to then renege on the deal and leave the rebels to freeze. Now, reading the requisitions that had gone through the quartermaster, the work orders that had been drawn up, he knew Vader had intended to uphold his end of the bargain and turn Executor's hangar deck into a giant prison for fifteen hundred of the enemy.

It was, of course, madness, but then Vader had already proven himself mad when he killed Ozzel and more insane still when, in the wake of the battle and the transport of the Executor's dead back aboard, he had ordered the rebel dead buried, their bodies carried into the caverns of their base and the entrances blasted shut. Veers had told him about the looks on the faces of the officers, how he had expected someone to put a blaster bolt through Vader's head. The situation hadn't improved much with Needa's murder, Needa who really hadn't been guilty of anything.

Fortunately, in the wake of the debacle at Bespin, Vader had disappeared into his quarters without killing anyone most likely hearing victims sigh of relief. What was it now, three days since anyone had seen or heard from Vader? Piett reviewed the orders on his comp again: "Surrender the person of Lord Darth Vader. . . ." A squad of Imperial guards under the command of a Captain Merula were en route even as he read. They were due in less than four hours.

The warrant was authentic. He had had to run it past his A' security code before it would open. So why did the whole business make him feel so uncomfortable? Why did he feel like he was betraying Vader?

He cursed himself for a fool and punched in the code for Vader's room comm.

"Yes, Admiral, what is it?" Vader answered.

Piett got no picture on his end and Vader sounded half-asleep. He hastily checked his chronometer; it was the middle of ship's night. "Lord Vader, something's come up. I need to see you in my office immediately."

"Immediately?" Vader sounded vaguely amused.

Oh, good, he'd insulted him; nothing like getting off to an auspicious start. "It is rather important, my lord, or I wouldn't have called you at this hour."

"I should hope not, Admiral. Very well. I'll be there shortly."

Fifteen minutes later, Vader walked in. Piett wasn't sure he'd describe the Sith lord as in a state of undress, but Piett was so used to seeing Vader tricked out in his full rig that finding him in nothing more than shirt, trousers, and mask took a moment's getting used to. Vader settled on the black leather couch across from his desk, crossing his long legs. "What's so important you had to wake me in the middle of the night?"

Piett still had the Emperor's orders up on his screen. He put a copy on the wall monitor above his head. Vader tipped his chin up slightly to read. When Vader was again looking at him, Piett, ignoring a well-honed sense of self-preservation, shared his plan. "If you like, I can have a shuttle fueled and loaded with

provisions. We're close enough to my home system you can make it there if you leave now."

"Leave?" Vader said.

"You're under arrest," Piett said.

"Flee Imperial justice?" Vader asked.

"I would. In your place."

"Of what, do you suppose, I am guilty?" Vader asked.

Piett blinked. "Burying the rebels on Hoth."

"Burying the rebels!" Vader laughed. It was a strange sound.

"Planning not to kill them in the first place," Piett added. Vader drew back. Piett could feel his eyes narrowing. "I've got the paperwork you sent to the quartermaster, to engineering and security." "Are you threatening me?"

Piett was almost relieved. This sounded like the old Vader, the one he was used to dealing with. "I don't think these acts are crimes," Piett said.

"You don't?"

"I don't think it's a crime to bury the other side's dead. I don't think it's a crime to avoid as much killing as possible. I don't know whether the Emperor shares my opinion."

"Harry and destroy the rebels," Vader said, quoting from their operating orders. "It's more like I harried Ozzel and that poor bastard Needa."

"Shall I have the shuttle readied for launch?" Piett asked.

"I only wanted my son," Vader said.

Piett wasn't sure he had heard him correctly. "Skywalker?"

"Luke. Did you know my old master trained him to kill me?"

Piett shook his head. He was out of his depth, and felt the bottom getting further and further away. He punched in the combination of his personal safe, withdrew his keycard. "These are the codes to my home. There are a few droids, my dogs."

"The Emperor wants him too, of course. Once he has him -- " Vader drew his thumb across his throat. "It's only human to want to protect your flesh and blood," Piett said.

"Human?" Vader laughed again. "Do you think I'm human?"

"You're getting more human by the minute and scaring the hell out of me," Piett confessed.

"I thought I was so strong," Vader whispered. In the middle of the night, Piett knew, people said things they'd deny even thinking in broad daylight. "Luke wants nothing to do with me, you understand. He tried suicide rather than deal with me."

"Skywalker's dead?" Piett asked, shocked.

"No. He has more lives than a cat. Like me. Before I fell into my pit on Tasheen."

"I'm sorry for your pain, my lord, but you don't have much time to make a decision. The Exey's doing three-quarters light," Piett said.

Vader's voice grew harsh. "I know what the Executor's doing. I know what treason is, too."

Piett sighed. He had hoped to do this the easy way. "Do you want some Qur-vas? I've even got some of those dreadful nuts that go with it." Something else he had inherited from Ozzel.

"No nuts. They make me sick. Qur-vas would be fine."

Piett went to the bar, poured two fingers of Qur-vas into snifters for Vader and himself. It wasn't hard, with his back to Vader, to spike the Sith lord's drink. Ozzel had had an intriguing pharmacopoeia as well. When he brought the drinks back, Vader was sitting with his mask dangling from its straps around his neck. "You got the back view once," the Sith lord said. "You may as well get the front."

"I should knock before I barge in on people too," Piett said, trying hard not to stare at the ruined face. He parked a hip on his desk.

Vader sipped his liquor. "What were you going to tell Captain Merula?"

"That you took off. I didn't think it would be too difficult to get the officers to testify to your increasingly eccentric behavior. No one has seen you for three days. The next anyone looked, you'd vanished."

Vader nodded. "I'm ashamed to confess I hadn't anticipated this happening. Reporting to the Emperor's one thing. Being dragged off is quite another."

"It's hard to imagine anyone dragging you off, my lord," Piett said, his face burning with the irony of his remark. He looked up to find Vader studying him again. Then Vader made some noise sure how to characterize it fragile Kosta glass before it hit the carpet and set it on his desk.

Piett typed in Veers' comm number. "Yes?" the general said. He looked more awake than Vader had sounded, but then he was younger than either Piett or Vader and had an ability to come awake entirely clear-headed that Piett envied.

"Willem, I need you in my office immediately."

"On my way."

"Bring an anti-gravity sled and a tarp."

"What?"

"Bring an anti-gravity sled and a tarp, and don't let anyone see you. You'll understand when you get here."

It took Veers about the same amount of time as it had Vader to reach Piett's office, and he was coming from farther away and guiding the sled with its canvas covering when he got there. He maneuvered the sled into the space beside Piett's desk and shut off the propulsion. "What's going on?" Piett gestured.

"Piett, you bastard, you've killed him!" Veers exclaimed. Piett couldn't tell if he was elated or horrified. Veers came in front of the couch, carefully stepping over Vader's legs, and began to study the Sith lord closely, being careful not to touch him or anything else. "The waste lock on Deck 26 is your best bet. No one goes down there except the droids. What did you do, poison him?"

"He's not dead," Piett said.

Veers turned around to look at him. "He's not?"

"No. Unconscious. You wouldn't believe some of the drugs Ozzel had, but I'll fill you in on that later. What do you estimate his weight to be?"

Veers turned back to Vader. "Hundred twenty kilos in his Skivvies."

"Good. Then I wasn't off much in my estimation. He should be out for ten to twelve hours."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Veers demanded.

"We're leaving."

"'We're leaving'? Who's we?"

"You and me."

"Oh, no. I can believe insanity's catching, but I haven't gotten it yet."

"He forced us to come, used the Force or something."

"He's gonna friggin' lose his temper when he wakes up and strangle you. Have you thought of that?" Veers asked.

"He's not going to wake up, at least not immediately. By then, phase two will have gone into effect."

"'Phase two'? What are you, a friggin' Bothan? 'Phase two.'" Veers rolled his eyes.

"Can you just help me get him on the sled and I'll explain on the way to the hangar? The watch is going to change in half an hour."

"Sure. But I'm not getting on any ship, not with you and Vader."

Veers got Vader's head and shoulders, Piett took his feet, and between them they wrestled the unconscious Sith lord onto the sled and covered him. In the silence, Vader's respirator cycled. "What about the noise?" Veers asked.

"Trooper tubes," Piett said. Executor had several transportation tube systems running her length, breadth, and depth. Depending on clearance, ship's personnel could use them to get around the ship quickly. The stormtrooper tubes were reserved for transporting the Executor's infantry between their quarters and the hangar deck during battles. Otherwise, they were locked down. But as admiral, Piett, of course, had access to every corner of the ship. "I've also shut down the surveillance cameras between here and the hangar."

"Shit, you are Bothan. How many nights have you spent dreaming this up?"

"None, actually. I'll explain that, too." Piett returned to his safe, began putting the packets of drugs Ozzel had left behind on the sled. "This explains most of it," he said, waving a disk at Veers before tucking it into his tunic pocket. "I pulled the relevant files, killed the backups."

They went express: down the officers' tube to the main trooper deck, steering the sled with Vader into a car. Then the anti-gravs took them, hurling the car the greater length of the Executor, about ten kilometers in all, in about six minutes. Piett was surprised when Veers volunteered to scout the hangar deck for techs before they maneuvered the sled out. The shuttle he had ordered fueled and provisioned earlier sat before one of the magnetic locks.

From the shuttle's ramp, Veers waved a 'come on,' and Piett put the sled in forward.

"Let's put him in the aft cabin."

"Right." Veers helped him get Vader onto the bed, even twitched a blanket over him. "So where are you going?" the general asked when he had followed Piett into the shuttle's tiny living area.

"Home."

"Home? That's a brilliant idea. I'm sure no one will think to look for you there."

"Well, I'm not going to the Alliance," Piett insisted.

"Sure you are. Eventually. When things get hot enough. The Alliance will be happy to fork over a couple of mil for Vader, and you can use the money to disappear." "Willem, please! I'm just about as scared as I've ever been and you're not helping. If you really want to know why I'm doing this, I'll show you. Sit down." Piett turned on the entertainment comp, activated the oversized screen.

"For the Hoth campaign, you put together the squad of commandos that was going to take out the power generators, right?"

"Sure."

"Did you ever ask yourself what Vader was going to do with the rebels he had left over after he got Skywalker?"

Veers shrugged. "Leave 'em to freeze, I guess."

"Wrong!" Piett crowed. It felt good to know he wasn't entirely crazy. He put his disk in the comp, got the first page projected in video format.

"What's this?" Veers leaned forward to study the requisition orders Vader had sent to the quartermaster. "Bunks? Food?"

"Document number two." The image changed to the work orders Vader had sent to Security and Engineering.

"Son of a bitch!" Veers exclaimed. "He was going to put the whole goddamn rebel base on the hangar deck."

"Looks like it to me," Piett agreed.

"Why?" Veers looked at him.

"Honor?" Piett suggested. "My take on it is he was going to negotiate Skywalker out. In exchange for Skywalker, he rescues the rebels. No Skywalker, they freeze."

"And Ozzel died for screwing this up?"

"Ah," Piett said, "here's where things get really interesting. What if Ozzel didn't screw it up? What if he sabotaged it?"

"No way," Veers protested.

"You remember his reaction when the data from the probe droid in the Hoth system came in? 'No. Couldn't possibly be a rebel base. Smugglers, maybe.' Sunspots. Anything. If looks could kill, I'd be in one of those canisters on Deck 30."

"You've got to do better than that."

Piett bit his lip. "Okay, how about this?" He projected the list of names and contact codes he had found in the safe.

"Who are these guys?"

"I don't know. But I don't think they're on our side. And here for my eyes only." He put up Vader's arrest warrant.

"Shit," Veers said succinctly.

"It all revolves around Skywalker. The boy's Vader's son, or so he said not fifteen minutes ago." "His son's in the rebel Alliance? No wonder he's in trouble with the Emperor."

"No. I didn't get the impression Skywalker had gone AWOL on him, run off or something. I don't think Vader knew about him until recently, and somehow the Emperor found out. Now the Emperor wants him too, and Vader's going crazy trying to get his hands on him before the Emperor does."

"So tell me again why Vader is lying drugged in the aft cabin?"

"If you had a choice, who would you rather see in charge?"

"In charge? Of what? The Empire?"

Piett nodded vigorously.

"God, Jan, you don't ask easy questions, do you?"

"Well?"

"Vader. He may be ruthless, but at least I can predict what he's going to do. The Emperor's a complete enigma."

"Yeah. That's my feeling, too. My plan is we get Vader to Nijmegen, try out those codes Ozzel had. If I'm right and they're his contacts in the Alliance, maybe we can set up a meeting, get Vader and Skywalker together, see if they can't come to some understanding. Skywalker's high up in the rebellion, hero of the battle of Yavin 4. It's better than letting Vader wind up on a meat hook in some basement on Coruscant."

"Didn't you already lay this idea on Vader?" Veers asked.

"I didn't tell him I could arrange a meeting with his son. I only told him the Red Guards were en route. He wouldn't leave. It's as though he can't see any way out. I think he may have tried a reconciliation with Skywalker and the kid told him where he could stick it. Maybe he feels the Emperor already knows he betrayed him, so what's the point of carrying on the charade any longer?"

"So you thought you'd give him some options?"

"Yeah. Dead, I figure he doesn't have any, nor do we. Willem, I'm sick of all the killing. I think the Emperor will keep killing people until there's no one left."

Veers shivered, made a face. "Well," he said, "the longer we sit here talking, the further away Nijmegen gets and the closer the Guards get. Do you have clearance, or were we just going to depressurize the bay?"

"I have the codes," Piett said, "which is better."

"You omnipotent little shit," Veers grinned. "You are Bothan."

"Please!" Piett groaned.

"I'd better fly. I don't trust you not to run us into something."

Piett remembered to deactivate the system that sent out the signal identifying them as Imperial to anyone listening; so much for Veers' diligence. As the light-years between them and Executor grew, he relaxed. Two hours into their flight, Veers set the hyperspace drop-point alarm. "Sleep or food?" he asked Piett.

"Sleep, definitely," Piett said.

"Does one of us need to stay awake in case Vader wakes up?"

"Oh, hell. I'll check on him, and I'll die regretting I couldn't kill Ozzel myself if those instructions he left with his tranq doses were inaccurate."

Veers at least went back with him. Feeling like a fool, he knocked on the cabin door, then, when there was no answer, palmed it open. Vader lay as they had left him, out cold. He turned to leave. "Just a second," Veers said. "Give me a hand."

"What are you doing?" Piett demanded as Veers walked over to the bed and got an arm under Vader's shoulders.

"Propping him up. Haven't you ever had pneumonia?"

"No!" Piett said.

"Well, I have, and I've seen enough pneumothoracic injuries. There's no point in kidnapping the man and then killing him through neglect. Fold the pillows in half." Veers wedged them under Vader's shoulders. "Good. He'll sound better soon."

"How can you tell?" Piett found himself shifting nervously from foot to foot. "Oh, fuck. I'm going to give him the antidote."

"No, you're not. He's not waking up until we get to Nijmegen and I have somewhere to go besides out an airlock."

"Willem!"

"Don't you go Navy on me now; how tidy, killing people from space. You're responsible. You dragged him."

"Why do you sound like my father?"

"Because you're this close to panicking and someone has to keep this operation on track. Take it from an old tanker, the trick is to take one thing at a time, one small thing at a time. First, we should both get some sleep. Take the cabin next door. I'll sleep up front in the crew's berth."

"No. I'm not sleeping in there. What if I can hear him through the bulkhead?" Piett jerked his chin at the door.

"Fine. I'll sleep in there. You sleep up front."

But he couldn't sleep, realizing, now that he had the leisure to breathe, just how much trouble they were in. They were AWOL, definitely. They'd stolen Imperial property. They'd kidnapped Vader. A few moments' notoriety, assuming they could actually convince anybody they'd done it. And last, but not least, Vader would be very angry when he woke up and probably insist on turning them all over to the Red Guards. *I'd kill him and Veers, personally, first. Trouble was putting it mildly.*

When he woke up, Veers had already taken the ship into atmosphere and they were coming into Waal. "How long have I been out?"

"Twelve hours by ship's chronometer."

Incredibly, he'd slept through the drop alarm. "How's Vader?"

"I gave him another dose with one of those nasty little finger-ring injectors. And I believe you about Ozzel: None of that stuff he had's Imperial issue. A good portion of it's psychoactive, and there's a couple of things in there you could have poisoned Vader with I suspect Ozzel had it. Security would have pitched a fit if they'd known."

"Nijmegen Control, Waal Sector." They both jumped in their seats at the voice blaring over ship's comm. "Please identify." Veers gestured for him to answer.

"Jan Piett, admiral, 9th Imperial Fleet, from Executor."

"Admiral? Last you're listed, you were a captain," the speaker paused, "sir."

The disrespect made Piett bristle. "Brevet promotion," Piett said, "I doubt the news has made it to headquarters yet."

"Whatever you say, Jan."

"Dirgen Koonig, is that you? And where's your misbegotten brother?"

"Here." Another voice, indistinguishable in pitch and timbre from the first, crackled out at them. "Reason for visit, Admiral?" Dirgen was back to business.

"Rest and recreation, Control." He looked at Veers, who gave him a thumbs-up.

"Very good. Length of stay?"

"Until they find us," Piett joked, then thought better of it. "Two weeks."

"Pick your spot, but try not to set that thing down on anyone. Control out."

"We are in luck," Veers said. "The Koonigs are Nijmegen to the bone, and we'll need as many sets of eyes as we can get, especially if you're planning on calling the Alliance and the Red Guards are on our tail. With the Koonigs on duty, we have some hope of a little advance warning, whoever turns up."

"I'll rent us a flitter," Piett said, and took the shuttle ramp into the sunshine of a summer day in Waal. It was good to be home, good to be in a place where he didn't have to be looking over his shoulder, where he knew and trusted the people.

At Veers' suggestion, they decided to do the drunk-friend bit with Vader, carrying him between them, his arms draped over their shoulders, with much "Hey, watch his feet!" and "Whoops!" cried heartily between them in keeping with their Imperial-officers-on-leave story. Not surprisingly, the Koonigs came bounding up as they were wrestling Vader into the rear passenger seat.

"Willem!"

"Yah, Koonigs!" Veers yelled.

"Who's your friend?" Piett thought Dirgen asked, although, in the uniform of Nijmegen port control, he was indistinguishable from his twin, Vig, tall, lean, with thinning strawberry-blond hair and a fair complexion.

"Darth Vader, and he's drunk as a skunk!" Piett confided, crawling out of the flitter.

"Yeah? I didn't think he could get drunk." Dirgen leaned in the door to get a look.

"Lots you know," Piett laughed, interposing himself between Dirgen and the object of his curiosity. Drunk worked only so long as Dirgen didn't notice Vader didn't smell of alcohol.

"So, did you kick rebel ass this action?" Vig asked.

"Some. But I'll definitely kick yours if you don't let me get home," Piett said.

"You come by for gin, you and Willem both, okay?" Vig insisted as Piett climbed into the driver's seat.

Veers gave the brothers a grin and a thumbs-up. "You bet." The Koonigs backed off as Piett brought up the anti-gravs, nudged the flitter's drive into forward, and took off for his house above the sea.

"Drunk as a skunk!" Veers groaned. "Really!"

Piett made a face at him.

* * *

If this was the Alliance's idea of a prison, Darth Vader thought he could get used to it betraying him. He was lying on a comfortable bed, the sun was warm on his face, and somewhere far off a gull called. Nijmegen, of course. The air smelled of the sea. He tried to move and regretted it; his head was splitting. Nearby, an animal growled, a small animal, by the pitch, one of Piett's dogs.

Nice dog, he thought at it. His control of the Force stank; it always stank when he felt ill. The dog leapt onto the bed, and licked his face. "Oh, God," he groaned, and covered his face with his hands, so it licked those instead. Where the hell's my mask?

"You'll drown if you don't sit up," a female voice said.

That got him upright despite his headache. Undeterred, the dog stood in his lap and kept licking. "Batavi, bad dog! Leave Lord Vader alone." Batavi jumped off the bed.

"I see you know who I am," Vader said, making an effort at focusing his eyes. "Who are you?"

"Hannah." She produced a tattered tissue from her pants pocket, passed it to him. "Captain Piett's my uncle."

The tissue promptly dissolved in the dog spittle, leaving pieces, he was sure, stuck to his face. "And where might your uncle be?"

"Down at the port. He had a call to make."

"No comm in the house?"

"It needed to go squirt, he said."

"Squirt? An interstellar message?"

Hannah shrugged.

He eased himself to the edge of the bed and was horrified to find that not only hadn't the lascivious Batavi left, two more dogs had joined her. They stared expectantly. "You wouldn't, by any chance, have a quart or two of electrolytic solution around here?"

Hannah shook her head in the negative.

"Citrus juice?"

"There are oranges in the kitchen That ought to help your head some."

"Does your uncle frequently drug people?"

Hannah laughed. "I wouldn't know, but I can recognize the symptoms of a bad headache when I see them. Uncle said you'd have a hangover."

"I feel like I have a hangover," Vader complained, "but Jedi don't drink to inebriation" "Well, don't lie down again or I won't be able to save you. There's nothing the dogs like better than a victim."

"I'll get to the kitchen somehow," Vader assured her, and staggered the few feet to the bedroom doorway. The dogs reluctantly gave ground. Hannah ducked under his arm.

"Bathroom's that way," she said pointing. "Kitchen's the other."

After he'd washed the remains of Hannah's tissue and the dog spittle from his face and had a pee, he found General Veers sitting at the kitchen table studiously filing the power contacts of his blaster. "Good afternoon, my lord," the general said. The tool disappeared into a kit spread out on the table.

For a moment Vader hadn't recognized the general. Veers had given up his uniform for a white band-collared shirt with pleated bib-front placket, leather galluses, and indigo-dyed dungarees. Flabbergasted, he whispered, "You, too? What is this, a conspiracy?"

"No, nothing so far-reaching as that. It's just Jan and me." Veers dropped the battery pack back into the blaster, slid the heel plate closed. Vader was relieved to see Veers' holster on the table. Veers put the weapon into it and slung the rig over the back of his chair. "How's your head?"

"Splitting. And my mouth tastes like the inside of my boots -- not that I've had occasion to taste them, you understand." He took the seat opposite the general. Hannah produced a jug of milk with a blue enameled mug upended over it, sugar, and a loaf of bread on a cutting board with a knife.

"Butter, jam, and cheese?" she asked, her head buried in the cooler, "but don't ruin your supper or I'll be irritated with you."

"Jam's fine." Vader said. He helped himself to one of the oranges, used his fingernails to start the peel.

Hannah produced the teapot, still steaming, and filled his mug, then topped off her own and Veers'. She took the third chair. "Rather closed-mouthed, are we?" she asked them while Vader stuffed pieces of orange into his mouth. Vader, chewing, smiled at Veers, who ignored him.

"Let's wait until your uncle gets back," the general said finally.

Hannah grunted. She was, apparently, one of those people who couldn't stand awkward silences. Vader decided to help her out. "So what do you do here, aside from saving guests from drowning in dog spit and serving tea?"

"Actually, I didn't expect to find my uncle here. I'm on leave from the university and since Uncle has a better library of stellar maps than the university does, I was hoping to be able to spend some time poking around in it."

"Are you training to be a navigator?" Vader asked.

"Astrophysicist," Hannah said. "Navigation's a sideline. At present, I'm looking for the sixth jump point in the Tatooine system."

"Oh, the mythical sixth jump point!" Vader exclaimed. The dogs came on the run to find out what all the shouting was about.

"It's there. And now that the Alliance is having recourse to even older ships, my chances of finding it are improving."

Vader scowled. "Run that past me again?"

"Because the Alliance can't buy modern ships, for obvious reasons," Hannah said, "they've been buying older ones. But their funding is getting better all the time."

"It is?" Vader wondered, looking at the general.

Veers shrugged. Hannah nodded. "It must be because they can't get parts for the old ships they already have, the ones they bought before the rebellion kicked into high gear. Not only aren't there that many, you boys have been blowing up the ones they have machining parts for them. That takes money, lots of it. Now, with their machine shops running, they can buy even older ships and keep those

flying as well. Older ships mean older navicomps, and that means older maps. You'd be surprised at some of the things that turn up in those old machines."

"I guess I would," Vader said, "but you'd have to hack them."

"Oh, I can hack," Hannah assured him. "Goes with the hobby."

Vader blinked, and took a better look at Hannah. Physically, she ran to the Nijmegen type: tall, blond, and slim, with a slightly flushed complexion. She had nice breasts, though. Unlike Princess Leia, who concealed her figure in men's clothing most of the time, Hannah wore a knit shirt and tailored pants that showed hers off to nice effect. And she wore her shoulder-length hair down. Vader was afraid to ask her if she had any other hobbies, for fear she'd say she shot rebels.

"Maybe I can help you look for the jump point," he offered.

That earned him a look from Veers. "I'm a native of Tatooine and grew up flying the system. I can find its jump points in my sleep," he said for Veers' benefit as much as Hannah's. Where the hell did the general come off glaring at him? For that matter, what was he doing thinking about Hannah's breasts?

"Fabulous!" Hannah agreed. She grabbed up her mug. "Star tank's this way."

Vader caught up his mug of tea and slice of bread and followed her. To say Piett had a better library of stellar maps than Nijmegen University wasn't an exaggeration, although Nijmegen had a galaxy-wide reputation for turning out the best navigators. There were boxes of tapes and disks everywhere in Piett's study and a state-of-the-art star tank that must have cost Piett two months' salary. "These are Uncle's latest acquisitions. They only got here last week."

Why wasn't he surprised to learn they were the downloads of the Millennium Falcon's navicomputer? "I don't think, whatever ship Uncle got them off of, her captain ever dumped anything."

"He probably smuggled," Vader said.

"Of course he smuggled," Hannah said. Vader got the impression she left the word 'idiot' off to spare his feelings. "According to his files, he's been everywhere, even to some places no sane person would go. And, of course, he's been through Tatooine more than once. It'll take the computer awhile to find the referents and line everything up." She turned to Vader. "What did you do on Tatooine?" she asked him suddenly.

"I worked for my sister-in-law's husband, only we never got married. My sister-in-law's sister and me, that is."

"Oh," Hannah said. Vader was sure he'd lost her. "But what did you do there? Tatooine's such a backwater."

"Repaired droids, mostly. The husband had a moisture farm."

"Good God!" Hannah grinned. "You were a farm boy in a previous life!"

"I suppose so. But the exposure to droids has stood me in good stead."

"I'll bet you can fix anything. Most people who grow up under conditions like that can. I'd like to fly, but my uncle thinks I'll get killed, what with the war and all."

"Your uncle's right, and things are getting uglier all the time."

"He didn't really kidnap you, did he? I mean, if you were drugged, you obviously didn't voluntarily come on leave with him."

"I'm afraid he did, and if you think I like feeling like a virgin in a really bad holo, you're wrong."

"Did he save you from a fate worse than death?" Hanna asked, badly confusing the plot line of his imaginary holo.

Vader blinked. "He may have. In fact, he probably did." Vader could think of few fates worse than winding up at the tender mercies of the Red Guard.

"Well, then, you ought to be grateful."

"I may be!"

Hannah laughed. "Now you do sound like a virgin in a holo. I'm sure he'll ask your permission before he does anything that would affect you personally."

"Except for the message he sent squirt while I was out cold in the back bedroom," Vader pointed out.

Hannah looked at him. It was obvious she wasn't used to thinking ill of her uncle. But then Vader didn't think she thought ill of anyone. Here she was talking to him as if he were some kid from the neighborhood, or one of her professors. He wondered, once again, what had become of his mask, and then was glad he hadn't woken up in it. Nothing like getting slobbered on by a dog to make you seem like regular folks, and at that moment regular folks was all he wanted to be.

His hopes were dashed when Piett came in. Hannah's uncle took one look at her hunched over his star tank with Vader seated on a stool next to her and flew into a rage.

"Hannah, what the hell are you still doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm on leave from the university, and since you gave me permission to use your equipment before you left, I thought I'd take advantage of the opportunity," Hannah said stiffly.

"Holy hell," Piett swore, "things are about to explode and you're fooling around with the star tank?"

"I am not 'fooling around with the star tank,' and since no one bothered telling me things were about to explode, I didn't know. Willem's sitting in the kitchen glowering and cleaning blasters and Lord Vader's recovering from a first-rate headache, which, he tells me, you gave him."

Vader looked expectantly at Piett.

"Change into these," Piett said, and shoved a plastic sack full of clothes into Vader's arms. "The Red Guards are no more than an hour behind us. We have to be ready to jump." "Red Guards?" Hannah asked.

"The Emperor's security. Your uncle already saved me from them once," Vader said. "Have they been spotted in-system?"

"Not yet, but it's only a matter of time." Piett headed for the kitchen.

"Willem, did you get those rucksacks packed?"

Hannah made a face at his back and Vader suppressed a snort of laughter. She looked at Vader. "I hate it when he starts ordering everyone around," she said.

"Actually, he's very good at it," Vader said, glad to have realized it before he had occasion to do something unfortunate to the admiral. "I'd better change." He got up, turned his steps toward the bedroom where he'd woken up. "Did you guess my sizes?"

"No. Willem did. But he's infallible."

Willem was, indeed, infallible, although Vader was beginning to wonder if there was any leeway in fashion on Nijmegen, not that wearing the same thing as Veers would be much of a disguise, not when he was as badly scarred as he was and bald as an egg. The bib-front shirt style couldn't be beat for convenience, though. He could conceal his respirator under it and still have easy access to it. His pants legs were wide enough to go over his boots. Back in the kitchen he found Piett had changed into a fatigue shirt and the ubiquitous dungarees. Veers was cleaning yet another blaster.

"Here," Piett said, passing Vader a holstered weapon and belt. "Do you know how to use one of these?"

"I think I can figure it out," Vader said dryly.

"Good. If you're close enough to use a lightsaber on someone who has a blaster, you're too close." "No," Vader said, "they're too close. But don't worry. My lightsaber's on Executor." Vader let the web belt out, buckled on the weapon.

"Willem, did you see about your father's boat?" Piett asked.

"He's canceled his charters for the next week, but he expects us to compensate him. The boat's tied up at the usual place at the dock and I had her fueled. Father laid in a store of dry provisions recently. We'll be good for a few weeks, if it takes that long," Veers said.

"If it takes that long?" Vader demanded. Planting his fists on his hips, he glared at them. "If our contacts take that long reaching us," Piett said.

"And what contacts would those be?" Vader asked. "Rebels?"

"Rebels. Your son's people. Unless you have another suggestion?"

"As well hanged for a sheep as a lamb," Vader said, shrugging.

"Pardon?" Piett said.

"I'm not sure being saved from the Red Guards is as attractive as it might be if the alternative is winding up on an Alliance gallows."

"At least with the Alliance," Veers said, "you can be moderately sure of escaping any precursor to being hanged. I shudder to think what the Emperor would have done to you."

"I am the Emperor's loyal servant," Vader said.

"Then you're the Emperor's loyal fool," Piett shot back.

Vader stared at him, so shocked that Piett had had the courage to speak his mind that he forgot about being angry. The admiral turned an impressive shade of red.

The comm buzzer sounded, putting any further argument on hold. Veers recovered first and answered it. "Yes?"

"Willem? Dirgen Koonig, here. You boys should have told us you were on the lam. We've got a contingent of Imperial guards here looking to arrest the lot of you, but you're safe for the moment. Governor Haas has objected to the Emperor sending a private police force to arrest Imperial citizens. He has refused to recognize the Emperor as a sovereign power, let alone grant him extradition rights."

"Good God," Piett groaned.

"We're supposed to hold them here until the courts sort it out. Using what for weapons, no one's told us yet."

"Thanks, Dirgen. You and Vig watch yourselves, yah?" Veers broke the connection. "I think I'd feel more comfortable if we kept abreast of events aboard the Jingle. Hannah, dear, you'd better come with us."

As they went out the back door, Veers passed Piett and Vader each a rucksack. Vader's was quite heavy: water, and power packs for the blasters, he suspected.

"So much for dinner," Vader sighed, following Piett down a dirt path that ran along the crest of a hill. Below was the Waal River, and beyond that, the sea. He lengthened his stride to keep up as the admiral broke into a jog. Veers brought up the rear.

* * *

"Vixen, this is Fox. We've been made," Meindert Seghers said into his comm. He couldn't believe they'd been spotted no more than five minutes into having the target's house under surveillance. "Our chickens have flown the coop."

"Made, hell!" Vixen said. "We've got a war down here. About two dozen Imperial guards just came barreling off a shuttle and are shooting at the Nijmegen Regulars. The Regulars are shooting back." "Over possession of our Imperials?" Seghers asked.

"You got another explanation?"

"Hell, no. But if they want 'em that badly, I'm for not letting them have 'em."

"Me, neither," Vixen said. "Leave someone to watch your back. Take the rest of your team and follow our chickens."

"Roger that," Fox said. He could hear the whine of blaster fire. "Vixen, if the Reds make it out of the port, I'm going to need some help."

"I'm on my way."

"Neeffs, you stay here," Seghers ordered. "The rest of you, let's go." The nine remaining members of his team followed him.

It was mid-summer and hot, and Seghers' group was on foot carrying full packs and comm gear. As they pelted down the hill overlooking the Waal, he grew more sure that if the Reds broke out of the port, they'd come up the river chickens come to the same conclusion? He'd bet they had a boat, but depending on how long the boys at the port held out, there was precious little time to put any significant distance between themselves and their pursuers. What would he do in their stead? Make it look like he had fled up river and prepare an ambush? Four against two dozen? They might, with the element of surprise on their side.

"Slow down," he yelled when they were halfway down. His group slid into one another on the steep slope. "Get down and spread out, and remember who you're shooting at." Now there were fourteen against two dozen. The odds were improving.

When they reached level ground, they worked their way forward on elbows and knees, keeping an eye out for any cover that was likely to conceal their chickens. The river was wide enough at this point to support a marina, but at mid-afternoon, most of the boats were out. One chugged to life as he watched, turned slowly, and began heading toward his position. Three men and a woman had left the house. There was one woman visible in the wheelhouse of the Jingle. She was blond, as had been the woman who was with his chickens, but that didn't tell him much. Many of the women in this sector were blond, and he hadn't gotten a very good look at her. Her male companions could be below decks, or lying in the brush not three meters from his position. Damn. He didn't want to reduce his force any further by trying to get someone on the boat. Well, he reasoned, this Pielt he was supposed to meet held the rank of captain in the Imperial Navy. He ought to have a rudimentary command of tactics. Biting his lip, Seghers decided to let the woman go, praying like crazy she was a diversion he hadn't bought.

As he'd anticipated, it didn't take the Red Guards long to fight their way out of the port. He heard the roar of their speeder bikes long before they appeared, skimming the river at a maniacal clip. He checked the charge on his blaster rifle, spread his legs to get a good brace, and waited for them to come into his sights.

Either the guards were really angry or someone had neglected their education in tactics. Seghers heard rather than saw Jingle open her throttles. In response, the guards opened their bikes up even further. Then the insane happened. One of his chickens broke from cover and strode out onto the marina dock, turning to face the oncoming bikemen. He was bigger than Seghers had first realized, and as he braced his legs and planted his fists on his hips, Seghers got the eerie impression he ought to recognize him.

"I am the Lord Darth Vader," his chicken called out, the voice unmistakable. "Why have you violated the sovereignty of this system?"

The lead bikeman waved four of his men forward. He and his wingman stayed on course for Vader. "Get down! They're going to shoot you, you idiot!" Seghers whispered to himself in an agony of dread. Sweat stung his eyes. One of Vader's companions realized the Sith lord's danger, and oblivious to his own safety, shot out onto the dock. He threw himself full length at Vader, catching him around the hips just as the lead guard opened fire. They crashed to the dock as the bikemen sped over.

As if that were some prearranged signal, a withering latticework of blaster fire exploded from above and behind Seghers' position. Vixen and her team had arrived and not a moment too soon. Aert and the rest of his team, lying in the reeds close by, opened up as well. The result wasn't pretty. Between them they cut the Reds to bits, speeder bikes caroming everywhere, bodies cartwheeling into the river. None made it as far as the Jingle, which continued upriver. Her pilot would have to find a place wide enough to turn around.

Seghers got slowly to his feet, followed by Aert and his men.

Vader, literally quivering with indignation, strode toward them, slapping ineffectually at his wet and muddy clothes. "They shot at me!" he yelled for the benefit of anyone who cared to listen. "They actually had the nerve to shoot at me!"

"Yes, my lord," his rescuer said. He was as wet and muddy as Vader. The two of them must have rolled off the dock into the water, Seghers realized.

"The bastards! They'll answer!" Vader raged.

"Yes, my lord," his companion said again.

It was almost funny. Seghers half expected Vader to burst into tears, he was that upset. He was tempted to point out the guards had already done as much answering as they were capable of, but didn't think that would soothe the furious Vader.

"Meindert Seghers," Seghers said when Vader had gotten closer. "Alliance for the Restoration of the Old Republic."

Vader looked him over. "No doubt."

"Who's your friend?" Seghers asked, gesturing toward Vader's companion, a well-built blond man only a few centimeters shy of Vader in height.

"Willem Veers, general, 6th Expeditionary Force," Veers held out his hand. Seghers shook it. "Nice bit of rescuing there," Seghers said.

"Thank you," Veers said pointedly. Seghers could see that Vader hadn't bothered thanking him.

"You must be Captain Piett," Seghers said as a short, nondescript man with slightly bulging eyes came up.

"Jan. Admiral of the 9th Fleet."

"You got a promotion?"

"Brevet. From Lord Vader."

It must have been interesting how that came about, Seghers thought, but kept it to himself; admirals didn't usually die in battle. Piett didn't look like much, but then he'd engineered the mess they were all caught up in.

"Permit me to congratulate you, Admiral Piett," Vixen said. She had worked her way down the slope with the rest of her team. "My name's Amalia Skojko, Alliance sector commander. You've touched off a first-rate diplomatic crisis."

"It would seem so," Piett said regretfully.

"Governor Haas has lodged a formal protest with the Emperor. I don't know how His Majesty will sort out the little matter of his guards shooting up Waal Sector port. I shouldn't be surprised if Nijmegen sues him personally for the loss. We can only anticipate further developments." She grinned.

Vader threw up his arms in disgust and walked away.

"My lord," Piett said to Vader, hurrying to catch up with him. "The Emperor's mad. He'll stop at nothing to compel obedience, Veers'."

Vader grunted and circled back. Seghers made the mistake of getting caught looking at him and got a finger wagged in his face for his trouble. "You saw none of this!" Vader growled at him.

"We all saw it, my lord." Piett had the courage to contradict him. "The guard shot to kill."

Vader sank down cross-legged on the muddy riverbank. Wet and in shock, he had begun to shiver. "And to think I would have killed my son for him! I offered to kill my son for him."

"Then perhaps it's best you come in with us," Amalia said gently, squatting next to him. "And lose my freedom?"

"Perhaps you never had any," Amalia suggested.

Vader turned to stare into her eyes.

"What kind of man would kill his own child for him?" she asked him.

"I don't know," Vader said.

"Come on," Amalia patted Vader's shoulder. "Admiral Piett, might we find a change of clothes for Lord Vader up at your house?"

"Yes. Of course. Good idea. Willem, stay here until Hannah comes back and bring her up, would you?"

"Yah, Jan," Veers said.

Together, Seghers and his group, Amalia and hers, took the hill back up to Piett's house, with Vader walking beside his admiral.

end

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