

The Empire's Finest

Oh, the grub's not so good and the gravity's low
If you don't wear your helmet, your head will explode
But we'll fight for what's right and the rights of all those down below
– Clawjob, "Goodnight, Aitken Basin"

Part 1: Meet the Troopers

The clicking of boots on the slick, well-polished floor slowed as Lieutenant Cor arrived at his destination. "You wished to see me, captain?"

Captain Kanos looked up from his datapad. "Ah, yes, very good. I have your assignment here." He passed the datapad to Cor.

Like many of the other officers who had arrived on the *Brigia*, Cor was to join a stormtrooper squad. Apparently, the squad Cor was to lead had lost their officer in a recent engagement. He thanked the captain and quietly extricated himself from Kanos' office, taking a turbolift to the stormtrooper quarters. He walked to the room indicated by the datapad and knocked. After a long delay, the door slid open, revealing three stormtroopers lounging on their cots, in addition to the one at the door.

"Hello. I am this squad's new officer, Lieutenant Cor."

"I hope you do better than the last one," one of the troopers remarked.

"Actually, I was hoping to discuss that with you. The official report was somewhat vague as to his exact fate."

"Wookiee tore him apart," a different trooper answered.

"You made no attempt to intervene?"

The first trooper spoke up again, motioning with his hands to emphasize his point. "He was way over there, and we were clear over here, and there were a bunch of rebels in between. So we did the logical thing and abandoned him to his fate. Don't worry – I think he got a medal posthumously, so it all worked out."

"Er... yes. Now, which one of you is Private Danton?"

One of the troopers on the cots looked up. "That's me."

"Very well. And which one of you is Private Felth?"

“I am,” said the one at the door. Cor nodded and consulted the datapad.

“Let’s see... Private Shne?” One of the troopers on the cots lazily raised one arm in the air and waved, the only indication that he’d diverted any attention from his own datapad to the lieutenant. Cor looked at the remaining trooper.

“And is it safe to assume that you’re Private...” he double-checked the datapad, convinced a cruel practical joke had been played on him. “Skywalker?”

The other stormtroopers started chuckling, which sparked a protest from Skywalker. “It’s not my fault I share a last name with that dumb farm kid! Nobody even knows it’s my name anyway, since I go by Delric.”

“Is your middle name Organa?” Shne asked, causing the other troopers to burst out laughing, despite Private Skywalker’s protests.

Cor shook his head. The squad had obvious discipline problems, which would complicate his job. “I was under the impression Skywalker was far from a common – or even widespread – name. You must be from the Outer Rim in the general vicinity of Hutt space.”

“It’s still not as weird as that Mando we had a while back,” Delric said. “What was his name? I think it had more apostrophes than letters.”

Cor blinked. “A Mandalorian in the stormtrooper corps? How did that come about? In my experience, such a thing is unheard of.”

Felth spoke up, moving further into the cramped quarters to sit on the edge of his cot. “There’s a reason for that. He was... interesting. It was his eagerness that ended up being his undoing.”

“That, and the guy was completely kriffing insane,” Shne said. “‘Honor’ this, and ‘tradition’ that. He even worked Mando words into his speech, but it just sounded like he made it up. Just take ‘oa’ and tack it onto the end of a word, and that’s about it. He was messed up’oa in his head’oa, to say the least’oa.”

“He talked about everyone else the way we talk about aliens,” Delric added. “I don’t know why, but he was convinced that Mandalorians are some kind of superbeings innately superior to everything else in the galaxy.”

“Well, we all know Erican’s opinion of aliens,” Felth said under his breath, causing Cor’s eyebrow to arch.

“And just what is that supposed to mean?”

“Just the near-human ones,” Shne said without a trace of shame. “Zeltrons, Twileks...”

Cor’s hand tightened into a fist. “Do you mean to say- to think such *perversion* would be present in the Emperor’s own elite!”

“Don’t be hard on yourself. We’re glorified police,” Shne said.

With some effort, Cor regained his composure. “We are servants of the Empire. We must uphold the values that are the foundation of our civilization: justice, order, the supremacy of humanity-”

“Killing civilians, Base Delta Zero-ing planets, yeah, we know the drill,” Shne interrupted. “Don’t worry about me – I’m too lazy to betray the Empire. Now can you leave? I *was* enjoying my time off.”

Without thought, Cor drew his sidearm, his finger hovering over the trigger. “You will not express anything but the utmost respect for your commanding officer.”

“And fear,” Shne said. “Fear is an excellent substitute for respect or loyalty. That’s also one of the pillars of Imperial society.”

“You know, when your life is being threatened, the least you can do is take your eyes off that kriffing datapad!” It was at that point that Cor noticed that none of the other troopers seemed alarmed by the incident. They were paying attention, and Danton was fixated on his DH-17 blaster pistol, but there was no fear. They didn’t believe he’d follow through on his threats. “Don’t push your luck again,” he finally said, holstering the weapon.

“Right’oa, boss,” Shne said.

“If you need me, I’ll be in my quarters,” Cor said sourly before turning and marching away at a steady pace. It felt like a retreat, but he didn’t know what more he could say.

“You know,” Felth said, “getting yourself in a position where you’re likely to get shot isn’t a great idea.”

“Are you *still* talking? Can’t any of you people shut up for two minutes?” Shne said irritably.

“What’s on that datapad that’s so interesting, anyway?”

“I’m watching my favorite show, *mom*.”

“You watch *All My Circuits*?” Danton asked. “I thought I was the only guy on board who likes that show.”

“That’s because you are. Except maybe the femme troopers.”

Shne immediately forgot about his datapad and looked up at Felth. “There are female stormtroopers?”

“Yeah... You didn’t know?”

“He’d just get turned down by them anyway,” Delric said.

“I don’t see anyone throwing herself at you, either, Skywalker.”

The conversation was interrupted when the intercom buzzed. “All stormtroopers report to Hangar C immediately.”

Captain Kanos looked at the perfectly-aligned ranks of stormtroopers assembled in the hangar. He effortlessly made himself heard in the cavernous hangar, which had been cleared of ships to make room for the ship's stormtrooper complement.

"We reverted to realspace approximately three minutes ago in response to new orders from sector command. A situation has arisen on the planet Metalorn, where the rebels have established a small base of operations. It is an industrial world, and the rebels are entrenched in a major urban area, so orbital bombardment is not an option. Instead, you will land and root out the infestation. Ensure that no enemies of the state survive."

Cor was mortified to see Shne raise his hand, and blanched when Kanos noticed and nodded.

"If the rebel presence is only in one city, why not go ahead and bomb it to dust anyway? It's just one city on one planet. No big loss."

Kanos cleared his throat. "I would prefer the quicker approach, though I have orders to keep civilian casualties to a bare minimum. This is still an ostensibly loyal world, though I have my doubts."

The captain drew a small holographic projector from a pocket and thumbed it on. Metalorn appeared as a shimmering blue sphere, with a small area indicated in bright red. "This is where you will be landing," Kanos said as the image zoomed in on the city where the rebels had established themselves. "A battalion will land ahead of the main force in order to scout the limits of the rebel position and contain the rebels prior to the attack on the enemy position."

Delric elbowed Shne and whispered, "Looks like we have a one-in-three chance of getting sent down. I don't like those odds."

Lieutenant Colonel Trask stepped forward. "I have chosen the 5016th Battalion for the initial landing."

Felth sighed, quietly talking to his squadmates while Trask continued. "I guess he's decided to send in his most expendable men first."

"But we're in the 5016th," Danton said.

"Exactly. We're already under-strength from Shili. He probably wants to wear us down enough to fold us into another unit and start over with some fresh recruits."

Cor shot him a harsh look, which Felth ignored. It was only a few seconds before Trask gave the order to move out. That earned odd looks from several troopers until shuttles appeared, sliding through the atmosphere containment field and into the hangar. Most of the troopers vacated the hangar, leaving the 5016th to its mission.

Cor and "his" squad boarded a Sentinel-class transport and made their way to equipment lockers containing weapons and the iconic, bone-white stormtrooper armor. Delric and Danton

examined an E-Web heavy repeating blaster that had been disassembled for storage. Cor spoke, just loud enough to be heard by the squad. “Just what happened on Shili?”

Felth shrugged. “Got in a fight with the rebels. A lot of men didn’t make it out.”

“Well, that would explain why there are only four of you. I was under the impression that a normal squad has eight troopers.”

“And I thought that most squads are commanded by a sergeant,” Shne said. “What happened to you? Someone decide to knock you down a peg?”

Cor bristled but, in a remarkable display of restraint, didn’t physically lash out at Shne. “If you must know, there aren’t nearly enough sergeants to meet every need. The military is expanding more rapidly than ever before in order to suppress the recent surge in rebel activity, which means most sergeants are tied up training recruits. The easiest solution would be to throw a few green men into your squad and promote one of you to sergeant, but to be honest I wouldn’t trust you with anything more important than an assignment stamping out hull plates for TIE fighters.”

“It’s nice to be trusted,” Shne deadpanned.

“This won’t be any good,” Danton said, placing the E-Web’s power generator back into the locker.

“Could you elaborate?”

Felth shook his head, but it was too late. “The generator hasn’t been pre-charged, the power conduit is loose, and the barrel’s already warped from overheating. And if you look carefully at the casing-”

“In short,” Delric said, “it would blow up in our faces.”

“Not really,” Shne countered. “It would take a half hour to set up. *Then* it would blow up in our faces.”

It was most likely a blessing in disguise that they wouldn’t use the E-Web. It would require at least two men to carry and set up, leaving only two troopers plus Cor to attend to other duties. Instead of the heavy blaster, they opted for battered E-11 blaster rifles and the Lieutenant’s DH-17.

Shne was just starting to complain about his armor and muttering comments about the “karking cheap military contractors” when the transport was rocked by a sudden impact.

“Fantastic,” Shne said, without even pausing to shift gears. “And here I was thinking this would be a group of disgruntled, slughthrower-armed factory workers. But no, they break out the heavy turbolasers. Fan-kriffing-tastic.”

“I suppose this means we’ll be facing rebel regulars,” Felth said.

“A contradiction if I ever heard one,” Cor sniffed. “They don’t have the discipline we do.”

“Discipline?” Shne said derisively. “Discipline doesn’t matter if we get hit with however many gigatons the rebs are throwing at us. Try being disciplined when you’re dead.”

Another blast struck the ship, sending some unprepared troopers sprawling and causing the lights to flicker. A trooper – likely an officer, though anything marking him as such would have been removed in order to prevent the rebels from specifically targeting him – standing near the rear exit made a hand motion. They were about to land.

A new sound joined the intensifying cacophony of rebel fire and the shuttle’s repulsorlifts when an AT-PT started making its way toward the exit. Where most would have been reassured, Felth shook his head in quiet disapproval. “If some rebel lands a lucky shot and destroys that thing on the ramp, we’ll be stuck in here.”

“Not a problem,” Shne commented. “We can take off, go back to the destroyer, and sit out most of this fight. Then again, some people here would probably have us try to push the thing out of the way instead.”

The rear ramp lowered the moment the Sentinel touched down. Shots from rebel small arms were harmlessly absorbed by the AT-PT’s armor, and the walker responded with its twin turbolasers. The rebels were scattered by the walker’s weapons, and troopers rushed out of the transport ship. The AT-PT stayed relatively close to the Sentinel and provided fire support, cutting down any rebels foolish enough to move into the open.

Cor and his squad hit the ground running. Whatever their other shortcomings, the troopers had a remarkable sense of self-preservation, as their first instinct was to dash for cover and stay there.

“What are you doing?” Cor shouted. “Stop hiding and fight the rebels!”

Cor had barely finished speaking when an enterprising rebel with a Merr-Sonn opened fire. He was hit by a flurry of blaster bolts and slumped to the ground, but not before four missiles were streaking through the air. They closed on the AT-PT, then flew past and into the Sentinel’s interior. A series of secondary explosions consumed the transport’s interior with a low rumble, leaving little more than a charred shell.

The stormtroopers looked at one another, then at Cor, who was blankly staring at the Sentinel, his mouth hanging open.

“I can see the Lieutenant’s short on words,” Shne said, “so just let me say this is kr-”

“Shut up,” Delric said. “We need to think. How many men were still on the transport when it went up?”

“Not us, and that’s what matters.”

“It doesn’t matter if we end up getting overrun by rebels anyway,” Delric snapped.

“Enough,” Cor said, regaining his composure. “Now let’s do what we can to push back that rebel scum.”

To his credit, Cor seemed willing to lead by example. He stepped away from the wall the squad had been crouched behind and started firing in the rebels' general direction with his sidearm. He was soon followed by Felth, and then the others, who were if nothing else reluctant to explain to Trask why they'd lost yet another officer.

Part 2: Stranded

A pair of thermal detonator explosions temporarily blinded Felth, despite his helmet's attempts to compensate. He activated his helmet's infrared sensors in order to pierce the cloud of dust thrown up by the blasts. A few mangled bodies and a small mountain of rubble were the only remnants of the initial rebel presence.

"Looks like we've got some breathing room now," Delric said. "Maybe now they won't-"

A red bolt flew past, leaving a burn mark as it narrowly missed Delric's helmet. "They're trying to flank us!" another stormtrooper cried.

A flurry of blaster bolts flew past. The fact that most of them struck the AT-PT said volumes about the rebels' training and combat experience. The walker turned to face the attackers while the troopers suppressed the rebels with massed E-11 fire. One trooper fell, clutching in vain at the hole where his heart had been.

"Oh... kriff. Disruptors! The rebels have disruptors!"

The AT-PT's guns and grenade launcher were now hammering away, shredding more buildings. It would probably have been less destructive to simply bombard the city from orbit, if the other landings were meeting similar resistance.

Another disruptor beam lanced toward the troopers, and a rebel somehow managed to make himself heard over to pandemonium. "Take that, plastic boy!" His gloating proved to be a bit premature, as a moment later he was sent flying in at least three separate pieces when a concussion grenade detonated right under his feet.

The rebels were taking losses – in fact, they were suffering much more heavily than the stormtroopers, who at least enjoyed the advantage of armor and a walker – though it seemed that for every rebel who went down, three more appeared.

"This is just ridiculous," Cor said. "Where are they getting these reinforcements?"

"I'm starting to think there are more rebels here than the good Colonel let on," Felth said. As if to emphasize the statement, a large wookiee appeared seemingly out of nowhere and thrust a wicked-looking knife into a trooper's neck. It then used the corpse – which it held in one of its enormous paws – as a shield while indiscriminately firing its bowcaster.

"That's it," Shne said. "I'm getting out of here this karking second."

To Cor's horror, Shne dragged Danton over to an E-Web that had just been set up and kicked the heavy blaster's operator in the face. He then detached the weapon from its tripod while Danton grabbed the power generator and the pair half-ran, half-waddled away as fast as they could. Delric looked at Felth, who shrugged, and the two followed.

"Get back here, you cowards!" Cor shouted. Felth paused in his tracks and looked back at the Lieutenant.

"Sorry, sir, but this is for your own good."

Cor had thought he couldn't be any more surprised or mortified by his squad's behavior. He was wrong. Felth seized his arms while Delric grabbed his legs, and the two carried him in the direction Shne and Danton were fleeing. "You'll thank us for this later, sir."

The troopers ran until the heated exchange of blasterfire had receded far into the background. They stopped, panting, outside a cantina.

"Set me down, you shavit-eating morons!" Cor screamed. "Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in? Dereliction of duty, assaulting our own personnel, kidnapping an officer! You're out of your minds!"

"Don't worry," Shne said as reassuringly as he could. "I have a cunning plan. Let's get drunk off our shebs!"

"How will that help you when you get court-martialed?"

"Can't hurt."

Before any of the others could respond, Shne opened the door to the cantina. He instantly wished he hadn't, as every eye in the dimly-lit bar turned toward him. That wouldn't have been a problem if not for the fact that most of those eyes belonged to rebels, all of whom were now reaching for a weapon.

Thinking quickly, at least by his standards, Shne jammed down on the E-Web's trigger. The weapon was far too heavy for him to aim, though accuracy didn't matter too much; the E-Web packed enough firepower to demolish the cantina in well under a minute. The sheer stupidity of his action was enough to keep the rebels firmly rooted to their seats for a few seconds. Once the surprise wore off the rebels beat a hasty retreat, several of them taking potshots before escaping through the back door.

"You idiot!" Felth shouted, slapping Shne on the back of the head. "Now every rebel in the area's going to be coming here to try to kill us!"

"There has to be a spaceport somewhere around here. We can steal a ship and escape."

"Assuming the *Brigia* doesn't shoot us down," Delric said.

"Or the rebels kill us on the way. Or destroy us before we make it to space," Felth added.

"I suppose this would be a bad time to mention I have another cunning plan."

“We’d all be better off if you kept your mouth shut from now on,” Cor said. “We have to get back to the lines.”

A rebel repulsor tank glided down a nearby street. It might not have noticed the stormtroopers if not for the pillar of smoke pouring from the cantina. Shne glanced at his E-Web, then at the tank.

“Bork this.”

He dropped the heavy blaster, which fell to the ground with a resonant thud. It took Danton a moment to pick up on the cue and abandon the power generator he’d been lugging around. Cor was the last to run, though even he realized the odds of surviving an extended encounter with the tank were next to nothing.

“Where to know?” he asked just before the tank’s turbolasers further wrecked the cantina.

“Someplace where this tank won’t kill us!” Felth said.

“Do we have any grenades?”

“Have you ever tried catching a moving tank with a grenade?” They ducked down a side street just in time to avoid another beam of red energy. “It’s not as easy as the war holos make it look!”

“I’m an officer! I’d say I know a thing or two about war!”

“And yet you keep trying to get us to put our lives on the line,” Shne said.

“That’s the point! You’re soldiers!”

“Wait, where’s Danton?”

Danton was somewhere behind them, lying on the ground. The rebel repulsor tank floated over him, turning to get a clear shot of the rest of the squad. The vehicle’s crew never noticed Danton jamming a thermal detonator into the underside of the vehicle before rolling free and running for his life. The other troopers, plus Cor, followed suit, madly scrambling to escape before the entire block was flattened. Felth watched in amusement while a rather large chunk of the tank went sailing through the air before landing in a children’s playground.

“If they didn’t know where we are before, they do now,” Shne said. Despite the sense of impending doom they all felt, there was definitely a trace of enjoyment in his voice.

“Look.” Felth pointed toward a cluster of large warehouses in the distance. “Let’s head in that direction.”

“And wander even farther from our lines? Absolutely not,” Cor said.

“There *are* no lines,” Shne said. “Just places with more rebels, and places with fewer rebels. I don’t know about you, but I’m heading for the second one.”

Cor thought about mentioning that such a course of action would require skirting the edge of the rebel perimeter. They wouldn't listen to him, anyway.

The five of them progressed down the street, at least two of them providing cover for the others at all times. At least they could act with something approaching competence when their lives were on the line. It was a small relief, but Cor would take what he could.

He ran into Danton's back when the troopers suddenly halted. Not too far ahead, more than a score of rebels was double-timing through an intersection. It was a small miracle that none of them spotted the squad of stormtroopers standing in plain sight about a hundred meters away, but then again they seemed fixated on something.

"Must be heading toward one of our landing sites," Felth mused.

They continued as soon as the group of rebels was safely gone. It wasn't long, however, until they suddenly halted again. "What now?" Cor demanded.

"Trip mine," Delric said. "We'll have to be care-"

A red blaster bolt struck him in the shoulder, and Felth and Danton had to reach out to prevent him from falling and triggering the mine. They ducked behind a column, Delric leaning on Danton for support.

"Sniper," Felth said. "I'm sure of it."

"What now?" Shne asked.

"I'm surprised you didn't just run away at the first sign of trouble," Cor remarked.

"Then he'd shoot at me, and you'd be in the clear."

"Ah, of course. The needs of the few versus the needs of the many."

Felth looked for potential escape routes. He glanced toward the nearest building and an idea formed in his head.

"Follow me," he said, moving up against the building's wall. He raised his E-11 and swung, smashing a window barely large enough for the troopers to fit through. Felth was the last to go through, right after Cor, who swore when he cut his hand on a shard of glass.

As they rushed through the building, looking for an exit, Felth noted that the lights were still on. The city had power. "You'd think we'd at least send some troops to capture or destroy the nearest power plant."

"Maybe we did and they failed," Delric said.

They found a door and exited, heading in the general direction they had before. Civilian buildings gradually gave way to the bare, utilitarian form of hangars and storage buildings. They were near the spaceport now.

"I'm surprised we haven't run into any more rebels."

“They’ll have moved to hold back our assault. If there are any around here, I bet they’re holed up and waiting,” Felth said.

In his peripheral vision, Felth saw Danton stiffen and immediately drop into a low crouch a split second before a blaster bolt passed through the air where his head had been. “What-”

“Looks like we’ve been followed,” Shne said, firing a burst from his E-11. “How many thermal dets do we have left?”

“I think Danton used our last Class-A,” Felth said, adding his own fire to Shne’s while backing away from where he assumed the rebel was. “That leaves us with a few lower-yield ones.”

“I’ll take anything at this point.” Another bolt struck Shne in the chest, burning away part of his armor. “All right, I’ve had it.” Now that he had a good idea where the rebel was, he slung his E-11 over his shoulder and grabbed a thermal detonator in each hand.

“Running time!” he shouted as he threw the grenades. Despite being the last to start running and having flash-burns on his chest, he still managed to outpace the others. “Think that’ll keep him off our backs?” he asked when he finally stopped to gasp for air.

Danton leaned against the side of a warehouse, accidentally pushing a door open and unleashing a scent that overwhelmed their helmets’ air filtration systems.

“What *is* that?” asked Cor, who was hardest hit by the building’s contents.

Delric smashed open a crate with the butt of his E-11. “It’s spice.”

“This isn’t just spice,” Shne said. “It’s glimmerstim. If that’s the only thing in here, we could be sitting on top of billions – no, trillions – of credits. If we just took one of these crates, we could buy-”

“Absolutely not,” Cor said.

“I was, uh, speaking hypothetically.”

By that point the musty smell of the spice was so strong that the troopers had activated their armor’s defenses against chemical weapons. Cor had resorted to using a rebreather. The troopers were marveling at the rows of crates stacked nearly to the ceiling when Cor noticed a small sphere rolling toward them.

“Move!” he shouted, snapping off a shot with his blaster. Against his own expectations, he managed to hit the target with his first shot, destroying the grenade. The troopers broke off in pairs, with Cor accompanying Felth and Delric.

“Looks like our rebel trouble’s followed us here,” Delric said.

They moved at a slow, deliberate pace, mindful of any sign of danger. The group frequently paused, scanned its surroundings, and resumed its steady pace.

Shne and Danton, on the other hand, had thrown caution to the wind. Shne's line of thought was that the rebel must have been close to them to toss a grenade, so the faster he got away from their original position, the farther he would be from the rebel.

That idea fell to pieces when he rounded a corner and ran headfirst into the rebel who had been pursuing them. For a fleeting moment, they simply stared at each other. The lull ended when Danton tackled the rebel and shouted for Shne to get the others.

Shne started to run, looking back in time to see the rebel push Danton off of himself and try to bring his rifle to bear. Danton countered by breaking the rifle in half with the butt of his E-11. Thinking quickly, the rebel pushed on the E-11, ramming the barrel into Danton's neck, and awkwardly jammed down on the trigger.

The rebel grabbed Danton before he could slump to the floor, using the trooper's body as a shield while he tried to change the setting on Danton's E-11. After a few seconds of unsuccessful attempts, he dropped the weapon and drew a holdout blaster. "You got lucky before, imp, but this is the end of the line." Shne moved his blaster in front of the hole in his armor just before the rebel fired, blocking the holdout's only shot. The rebel let out a frustrated cry and tossed his human shield aside.

Shne knew an opportunity when he saw one, and threw his now-useless blaster at the rebel. It slammed into his opponent just before he did, delivering a right hook to the rebel's jaw. He followed up with a headbutt, then struck the rebel in the stomach for good measure. His enemy came back slashing with a vibroknife, a wild gleam in his eye.

"Why don't you just die for your emperor already, you brainwashed, skull-faced Mando wannabe!"

The last part of the insult caused Shne to instantly freeze in his tracks. He didn't respond even when the rebel thrust the vibroknife in his armor's left shoulder joint.

"What... did you just call me?" He continued before the rebel could do anything more than shift from rage to confusion. "That. Is. It."

The rebel laughed nervously. "What, are you going to go run crying to your precious emperor? Who cares, anyway? If you die here, they'll just clone another stormie to replace you. You're just a drone, forced in a mold. Processed and-"

The rebel was interrupted when Shne, the vibroknife still jammed in his shoulder, used the crudest and most effective of martial arts moves, causing his victim to double over in pain. He looked up at Shne, tears welling in his eyes, just as the stormtrooper drew the blood-soaked knife from his shoulder.

"That was a nice little speech. Here's my rebuttal," Shne said. "I hate you."

Counter to the rebel's expectations, Shne didn't immediately use the knife. Instead, he picked Danton's rifle off the floor. "Oh, and by the way, he always keeps it on stun. What kind of kriffing idiots are they letting into the Rebel Alliance these days?"

He knocked the rebel out with a swift blow from the E-11. Whatever else it may have been, the E-11 was sturdy. Shne smacked the rebel several more times before activating his comlink and telling Cor he had a prisoner.

“We’ll be over there immediately.”

“Five minutes ago would have been better.”

While waiting for the others to arrive, Shne checked to see what condition with Danton was in and kept a watchful eye on their new prisoner.

Well, he thought, what now?

Part 3: Collateral Damage

“What happened?”

“We got, ah, ambushed. Now can we get out of here?”

“Where’s that smoke coming from?” Cor asked. Between fighting for his life and the protection offered by his suit’s filters, Shne hadn’t noticed the small fire his disabled blaster had started.

“Shavit. The power pack must have blown when the reb shot it.”

“How could it have overloaded?” Cor asked. “That design problem was eliminated long ago.”

“I may have... modified it,” Shne said quietly.

“You modified it to explode?”

“I modded it to make a more powerful bolt. It did... just with that one minor problem.”

“We don’t have time to talk about this,” Cor said, exasperated. “Let’s get out of here before your ‘minor problem’ brings this building down on top of our heads.”

The stormtroopers rushed out a side exit, Shne and Delric carrying Danton, just before rebels started pouring into the warehouse. Had they not been running for their lives yet again, they would have been amused by the rebels’ frantic calls for help and futile attempts at stopping the fire’s spread. Through a stroke of luck, none of the rebels noticed the escaping troopers, though even if they had it wouldn’t have mattered; fumes from the burning spice had reached a toxic concentration, forcing the rebels to flee the building or be suffocated.

Within minutes the entire warehouse was ablaze, its contents irrecoverable. Fanned by a strong wind, the flames spread to neighboring buildings, destroying the largest spice cache in the sector. A towering, narcotic plume spread over the city, instantly debilitating anyone without

full-body biological weapons protection. Relatively few members of the Rebel Alliance's infantry had such protection, and entire units collapsed in the face of the unexpected attack.

Cor's squad couldn't see the situation as a whole, though they knew something was happening. Assault landers and TIE variants filled the sky, signaling the beginning of the main attack. With rebel attention fixed on the new arrivals, the lone squad went almost completely unnoticed.

"Where do you think the nearest friendlies are?" Delric asked. "If I have to carry Danton around any longer, I—"

"Look," Felth interrupted. He was pointing at an approaching AT-AT that dwarfed most of the surrounding buildings.

"That solves that problem. Now we just have to worry about getting charged with treason," Shne said.

Cor watched as the walker lurched closer, swinging its head to fire at targets far beyond his own line of sight. "I think that, in light of the end result of this escapade, any misdeeds on your part can be overlooked. Your discipline is a problem, of course, one we'll have to correct. You got lucky this time; as far as I know, there was no information indicating that the rebels were using this area to store and distribute spice. But that doesn't change the fact that you have most likely crippled rebel finances in this system, and possibly even the sector."

"You can bring discipline up in the next inspection. Assuming you last that long."

"And just how long was your previous commander with you?"

"About a month," Delric said.

"Better than that Mando," Felth chimed in. "He went about two weeks before his Mando superiority ran into his Mando limitations. What's *wrong* with those people?"

Shne shrugged. "When life gives you lemons, make Mandoade." Cor shot him an odd look, so he explained. "Yeah, it's a real drink. He kept reminding us that it's made from the finest ale and the blood of the Mandalorians' fallen enemies. Except that Mando beer tastes more like lemon juice mixed with cheap meat that's been left under a mattress for a year. I don't think they even use real blood in it; it's probably nerf blood, since most Mandos are too stupid to actually kill an armed opponent."

Cor motioned for him to stop talking when he saw additional stormtroopers approaching. "Excuse me, sir," one of them said, "but do you have any info on the toxic cloud that originated near this area? We need to know if it's safe to proceed."

"If you have proper protection, it should be. It's nothing more than enormous quantities of spice that caught fire after we engaged some rebels in the vicinity of those warehouses, along with whatever else is getting mixed into the smoke."

The new arrivals looked at the pillar of haze-inducing smoke that filled much of the horizon. "*You* did that?"

“It’s a bit complicated,” Cor said, “but no use talking about it. Now let’s mop up the remaining rebels.”

“And get a medic over here,” Shne said. If at all possible, he was going to sit out the rest of the battle. He figured he’d done more than enough and, for once, Cor agreed.

Part 4: Epilogue

“Writing the AAR was a nightmare.”

“You’re welcome,” Shne said.

“Having to cover for your incompetence is not my idea of fun,” Cor said testily.

“Look at it this way – you’ll probably get promoted,” Delric said. “The rebels were pretty much funding all their operations in the sector with drug money, and now that operation’s gone. I’ve already heard at least one person refer to you as the ‘Hero of Metalorn.’”

Cor grimaced. “My superiors have decided that we’ll be shuffled into the stormtrooper corps’ ISB component. Apparently, our success in infiltrating one rebel stronghold entirely by accident has convinced them that we can do so intentionally on a regular basis.”

Shne sighed. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Our next mission will be in the Coruscant undercity, hunting down a Force-user that’s eluded all other attempts at capture.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Delric said doubtfully.

“Our quarry’s pursuers have often been found in various states of dismemberment,” Cor said.

Felth looked at the Lieutenant, then at Shne. “I have a worse feeling about this.”