

Matters of Survival

By Tony “Thunder” Klepack

Jakhob Ferros opened his eyes to a spinning world and a constant dull pain in the center of his head.

He squeezed his eyelids shut then slowly opened them again. The world was beginning to slow down now but he still didn't dare rise for fear of toppling over.

He laid there in the dark for some time longer, waiting for his equilibrium to return to normal. Finally, he felt as if he might be able to rise safely.

He moved, finding himself trapped under some debris. He pushed slightly with his back, testing to see if his body could move it aside or if he was stuck. The rubble gave and he exerted himself fully, the debris sliding off him onto the metallic ground.

He stumbled to his feet and rose to his full height to find himself in the midst of a burned out machine. It was all that was left of his *Stormhawk* unit.

He gazed about the area, noticing immediately that the Renegade Destara spacecraft was no longer where it had been stationed before.

The landscape was one of twisted charred metal. Other Stormhawks had gone down here as well as various Destara warriors.

His instincts kicked in and he retrieved a laser rifle from the wreckage of his fighter. This was enemy territory, after all, and he had no way of knowing if he'd been detected. From the looks of things he'd been out for some time and no one had yet bothered to clean up the mess but that could change at any moment.

Jakhob searched the rest of the debris field, hoping to find other survivors. His ambitions to that end were quickly quashed however. Every body that hadn't been destroyed outright in the initial battle was cold and stiff.

None of the former Mecha were in salvageable shape. Not that he would've been able to do much with them even if they had been. He was a soldier first and foremost. Engineering had been someone's else problem back on Centaurai.

He acquired two more rifles and a pistol from the debris as well scavenging some comm packs and rations. He had no idea how long he might be here and he had no way of knowing if there was any necessities he could utilize on this bizarre alien world.

He cast a glance about him, taking in the metallic landscape. Everywhere he looked were behemoth structures jutting forth into the dull ?? sky. He presumed they were buildings like back home although he'd never seen so many in one place before. Could there really be that many Destara on this world?

The ground was a smooth metal texture in most places—the antithesis of the soft brown soil back home. Sybora Prime had the feeling of a world that had been constructed more then developed naturally.

For all he knew it had been. The Destara base back home had numerous records of worlds that the Empire had converted through a terra forming process of sorts. Perhaps Sybora Prime was no different. He didn't know.

Satisfied he had all he could carry, he turned and moved for the nearest structure he could find. It made sense not to stay out in the open. He had no way of knowing when or if someone

would be along to clean this mess up. With a little luck they wouldn't be expecting a lowly human to be prowling about their majestic world but it never hurt to be cautious.

It took a couple of minutes to close the distance between where he'd been and the shelter of the tunnel. It had been the same structure the Renegades and his own Rebels had penetrated earlier to rescue their comrades. Jakhob had been one of the sentries standing guard outside and hadn't been privy to the events that transpired inside.

He moved inside the building and noted the corridor carried on for some distance inside the structure. The entry had two massive doors that protruded from the walls to either side, their squared "teeth" jutted outward from the frame. For whatever reason they had remained opened after the earlier debacle. Perhaps they'd taken damage in the firefight.

He tread down the corridor a little while, noting the nondescript steel panel walls as he did. This building lacked the warmth and life that even the Centaurai base possessed when he was younger. It felt vast and empty by comparison. There was no energy, no emotion.

No soul.

'They have no soul,' he remembered Derec saying famously. *'No love, no compassion, no feeling. They only exist to conquer and spread their misery everywhere.'*

He'd remembered his General's words well over the years and whole-heartedly believed in his doctrine. Derec Steele had a vendetta against the Destara—much like many of their race did. They had killed his wife after all.

They'd all lost people. Jakhob had been fortunate not to have lost any loved ones but he had seen more than his share of friends perish in service to the rebellion. Perhaps they hadn't been blood relations but surely they had been spiritual family. Did that make them count any less, he wondered.

But things had changed. Humanity had succeeded in their plight against the Destara because of renegade Destara. Beings that seemed to have evolved some compassion of their own despite Derec's beliefs. He wondered how the General had reacted to that personally.

There was a belief that someone had put forward in one of their ancient religions that a soul was not something someone was born with, rather it was earned through suffering and experience. Had these renegades then suffered enough in their lives to earn such honor? He didn't know about that. Certainly his own people had suffered enough to qualify.

He passed a series of large grates. He presumed they were utility ducts of some kind. Heating or air perhaps. He didn't know what kind of atmosphere the Destara natively required but Sybora Prime's mixture of compounds was amicable to a human being fortunately.

He wondered if he could pry one of the grates open. It seemed to conceal a duct large enough that an errant human visitor could safely conceal itself from detection.

The alternative was to continue on down the corridor and hope he could find some shelter in the future. He'd seen no one so far but logic dictated there had to be Destara warriors somewhere around here and it was only a matter of time until he encountered one.

He searched his supplies and located a small toolkit. Inside it was a laser welder that he figured would do the trick. He twisted the device's controls until he had what he figured was the correct setting.

The grate he chose was attached on all four corners by metal bolts that secured it to the wall. He trained the welder on one and began cutting through its head. He hoped to be able to loosen one end of the grate and then squeeze through it. If he had to go further and cut all of them then he didn't know if he'd be able to get the grating back up in place properly to make it appear

as if it had been undisturbed.

The first bolt went easily and he immediately set upon the second. He was half way through it when a distant noise snapped him to attention.

He powered off the welder and sat still, straining to hear any follow-up sound. He glanced both directions down the corridor and noted no activity. The deeper end curved left about twenty feet away and he knew someone could be on their way around the bend.

He remained immobile a beat longer, trying desperately to confirm movement. When silence greeted him, he slowly switched the welder back on and immediately returned to his task.

The instinct to hurry ran through his brain and he wasted no time completing his objective. He was probably just being paranoid but he didn't want to stay out in the open any longer than was absolutely necessary.

He pried at the grating and was elated when it gave way as he'd intended. He re-packed the welder then gathered his supplies and began sliding them into the duct.

Steel slammed violently against steel somewhere nearby, the thunder cascading down the hard metal walls. There was no denying it this time. Something was nearby and he was in danger.

He pried the grate back once more, slipping his foot inside first then moving his entire mass in behind it. He pulled the grating back into place, silently praying it would look as it always did if someone strode by and glanced in its direction.

He moved away from the covering as much he dared then listened as several sounds caught his attention. Footfalls echoed down the corridor, louder and louder as Destara converged on his position.

His heart raced as they approached. Had he been detected somehow? Were they about to peel the grating back and take him? Perhaps they'd just kill him then and there like an insect to be done with it. After all, what value did a mere human life hold for them.

Sweat streaked down his forehead. A stream dripped into his eye and stung it but he remained as still as he could will himself. His pulse was loud in the silence of his mind right then. No thought occupied his mind as he waited. If he was going to die then he would be alert to the last moments of his life not distracted by any random musing.

The sounds became loud and he knew they were right outside the shaft right then and there. He heard three aliens voices communicating in a language he could not understand. But the vocal tones were unmistakable:

They were Destara!

He silently cursed himself for not having brought his flight helmet and the comm system built into it. The Destara on Centaurai had communicated in Terran—but that had been for the benefit of its inhabitants. This was certainly their native tongue but without a translator he couldn't hope to figure out what they were saying. Did they know he was there?

As abruptly as they approached the voices and footsteps softened once more and he realized they were moving past him. He'd gone undetected!

He released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and allowed his muscles to go limp.

There had been five of them by his count. All Destara warriors moving toward some ultimate destination outside the complex. Were they the long anticipated clean-up crew, he wondered. Or had they been a security patrol of some sort.

He sucked in a deep breath then exhaled it sharply, trying to calm his racing heart. The immediate danger was over. He was safe for the moment. Well, as safe as he could be on an

entire world occupied by Destara anyway.

He was drained after the encounter. He lay against the shaft wall, content to let his body recover from the exertion. After he got his strength back he could always–

Do what, he wondered. Derec and the others were long gone and he was stranded here. What did he have to look forward to at this point? Without any way to escape he had all the time in the world...

He played the image of the empty landing point back over and over again in his mind's eye. They were gone. Really gone. He was stranded. Alone and helpless on a bizarre alien world he couldn't hope to comprehend.

Even if he could get off the surface somehow he had no idea where Centaurai III was in relation to Sybora Prime. He wasn't knowledgeable about space travel but even he knew the Universe was a vast area to try and search without any frame of reference.

He wanted someone to blame. But he couldn't really justify it when he considered all the facts.

Derec wouldn't have willingly left him behind here. He'd come all this distance to rescue Sarah and the others after all. If he had any way of realizing one of his own was still there he would've done anything in his power to rescue them.

They'd left because they'd completed their mission. It was logical. They couldn't have known he was still here. Still alive under some debris.

And, after all was said and done, he *had* volunteered to go on this mission. No one has coerced him into making that determination. Ultimately he could really only blame himself for his current predicament.

He considered his options such as they were. No ship meant no way home. He'd also ruled out the Mecha debris earlier. It was ruined beyond repair and he didn't have sufficient skill to repair anything in any case.

He was going to die here. Part of his mind told him he was being foolish but that dread had settled in at the back of his mind. He was stranded. Ultimately helpless. Surrounded on all sides by forces that would destroy him at best. At worst, they'd ignore him until he died of starvation or thirst.

Either way, he was doomed.

The more he dwelled on it, the more frustrating it became. There was simply no way out...

Fatigue tugged at his mind and he realized he was too tired to think straight. He'd been up for an entire day before even setting foot on this alien landscape. He needed to sleep or he wouldn't be able to formulate a plan to survive when the time came.

The shaft seemed relatively safe. None of the Destara knew he was there at the moment and he could use that time to himself. If he was discovered somehow, well, then he'd simply die faster than he was fated to already. Certainly it would solve his current dilemma.

He lay his head down on his backpack and slowly closed his eyes.

He should be so lucky...

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Jakhob awoke with a start.

Dozens of insects were scampering all over his sprawled out body to his horror. He whisked them off of him, catching most of them in his initial strikes. A few had been out of range of his fingers but they didn't evade his grasp long.

He watched in morbid fascination as the tiny metallic critters scampered back away from him, congregating near a large segmented millipede. Its optics glowed a dull purple and it hissed at him disapprovingly.

He grasped for his pistol, uncertain what the other creature was going to do next. It seemed to consider him a moment then two metallic mandibles jutted from out under its jaw and it rushed forward.

He didn't waste any time squeezing off a volley of energy blasts into its head, burning the metallic visage cleanly away. The large mass collapsed near his side, purple fluid gushing out of its large wounds.

The smaller bugs slowly crawled up and all over the larger one. It did not react to their presence and slowly he relaxed his posture once more. Perhaps the little ones had decided to make a meal of their surrogate.

He decided he didn't want to find out. He investigated his two knapsacks, making certain neither had any more of the insects on them. Satisfied there were none, he moved for the large grate he'd entered through and pushed.

The larger corridor was as still as it had been when he'd first entered the complex. He hoped there were no patrols roving about the place as he moved deeper into the building. Not that there was anything he could do about them even if there were he reminded himself.

He didn't know how long he'd slept but he felt better. His muscles ached but the edge had been taken off his fatigue and he could concentrate again.

His body was better but his spirit was still depleted. He had considered his options and found them fleeting.

Jakhob arrived at a split in the corridor. One way proceeded off into the distance while the other corridor opened into a hallway adorned with large statues of Destara warriors. He thought a moment then turned down the second corridor. If nothing else, the statues might provide some cover while he thought about what to do.

The corridor was wider than the previous ones. He wondered if it had been constructed this way intentionally so that more Destara could pass through here and appreciate the stone work. Perhaps it was some sort of shrine to past heroes of the Empire.

He moved deeper into the passage, noting that there were small alcoves inset between the statue pedestals. They weren't extravagant but he figured they'd do for concealment. At the very least a Destara warrior would have to be standing right in front of him to see him. Someone passing through wouldn't notice him nestled away in the shadows. And that was assuming anyone passed through. Thus far, he'd seen virtually no one in the complex.

He made certain there was nothing else in the shadow of the alcove then slowly eased himself into position. The chamber was silent and he allowed himself a sigh.

He was safe here. At least for the moment. The question was, now what?

He'd counted his supplies when he'd first acquired them and knew he could likely manage on his rations for about four or five days before they were depleted. He also had enough water to last a couple of days for certain. But the Destara had no need for organic food or water and once those were gone it was only a matter of time before he'd perish.

He supposed it was possible he might find more food or water somewhere but there was no way to count on it.

There was also no help or rescue coming. Certainly Derec and the others must have already thought him dead. If not, they wouldn't have left in the first place.

Ultimately there were three options he could think of. One, was to survive as long he could with what he had and hope for a miracle. If nothing turned up, he would be dead inside of the week.

The second was to spend as much time trying to find transportation off-world as he could. There would be nothing designed for a human, of course, but perhaps a transport he could stow away on. Even then, he was completely unfamiliar with the area and his chances of success were slim.

The third option, dare he consider it, was to end it all now and be done with it. He had enough power in his gun to kill himself. Surely it would be quick and easy. He could adjust the weapon to make certain it killed him in one shot and he suffered no pain.

He drew his pistol, regarding the sleek black chrome on the weapon. There was a small power bar and a touch strip to increase or decrease the output if so desired. Right now the indicator was situated in the middle at standard yield.

Jakhob turned the weapon over in his hands. It was funny how something so small could cause so much destruction and yet he knew that it had, time and again. All he needed to do was take it and rest the barrel under his chin then squeeze the trigger. It would be over for him and he wouldn't have to suffer any longer.

This was the only way... he could go out on his own terms here and now—or stumble around the city either dying of starvation or whenever someone inevitably discovered him.

He regarded the pistol in his hands intently...

There was no one waiting for him back on Centaurai. He'd never been that close to any members of the opposite sex. He hadn't been good with women, although he didn't like to admit that to any of his friends. He preferred to use the excuse that the war consumed all his time instead. But that was just a lie to conceal his fear he realized now.

They all believed he was dead already. They'd never realized he survived long enough to come to this decision. They'd never know the truth of the circumstances behind his last minutes of life.

He'd be remembered as a hero not a coward.

He adjusted the energy output two levels higher and shoved the gun barrel up under his jaw. He closed his eyes and rested his index finger on the trigger.

Some small part of his mind hesitated.

This was logical. It was the prudent thing to do in the situation. No one would blame him if they knew his predicament...

But I don't want to die!

He threw the gun away from him. He heard it clatter against the statue's base then land lifelessly on the steel floor a few feet away.

Things were bad. His options were limited. But hadn't it been the same way for Derec back when he'd begun the rebellion? He'd persevered against overwhelming odds and ultimately triumphed. He hadn't faltered! He hadn't quit even when it must have seemed hopeless.

Derec had taught him—taught them *all*—that life was worth something. That they had to fight for what was theirs. That they had to struggle to control their own destinies—or the tides of the Universe would keep sweeping them along on its own momentum.

Could he simply throw it all away now because it seemed bad? What would Derec think of that if he knew?

Maybe, just maybe, he could try to find a way off this world. If he devoted all his skill

and resources to that end, perhaps fortune would favor him in his time of need.

If it didn't, ultimately, then he could always finish himself off then. If he really was dead either way then would it hurt to indulge his foolish sense of hope and at least try to escape?

He retrieved his pistol from where it had landed. A cursory glance revealed that it was undamaged and he quickly holstered it once more.

Now that he'd determined he was going to fight to stay alive he knew he'd have to come up with some kind of plan. There had to be a space-port somewhere in this city and he had little time to try and locate it. He had to be methodical and resourceful if he was going to succeed in getting out of here.

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Jakhob had explored the complex a bit further but ultimately found nothing of value to him. The building had a multitude of rooms and very few Destara moving about the corridors. He wasn't certain what its function was but he didn't get the feeling it was what he ultimately sought.

He'd retraced his steps and found his way out of the complex and back to the streets of the city itself. He'd tried his best to stick to the shadows and areas where he could conceal himself if needed.

He'd searched in a rough circle from the complex at first but ultimately found nothing. As time wore on, he expanded his area considerably while still trying to keep a fix on his original starting point so he wasn't wasting time revisiting spots needlessly.

He had stuck to secluded alleyways and hiding in small yet safe areas when he'd needed to rest. He'd slept a few hours here and there as the occasion called for it but never felt relaxed enough to fall into a heavy slumber. The fact his rations were limited was also at the back of his mind each time he rested and he didn't want to stay down for too long at a time.

The cityscape was not bustling with activity the way the Centaurai Destara facilities had been. Although he did see regular patrols streaking through the skies. On a handful of occasions he'd also discovered small groups of warriors moving about the streets here and there on some unrevealed business. He'd considered following after them but ultimately thought better of it. If he'd been detected he knew he would be no match for so many of them.

Finally after two days of searching he'd located a titanic gateway that lead into what appeared to be another section of the city. The walls were composed of some sort of red stone instead of the customary metal he'd come to expect.

The gate way was open with two large silent Destara standing on either side of it, each grasping sizable staffs with intricate designs atop them. Certainly weapons of some kind.

The area beyond was a different tone entirely then this one. While this one had a sterile steel motif the other side was decorated with signage and what appeared to be displays of artwork—a mixture of statues, murals and fountains spewing some sort of colorful fluid. It seemed lived-in compared with the place he'd been.

He wondered if his side was significant somehow. The Renegade Commander, Magma, had spoken of how the prisoners were being taken to see Deceptar—the Destara deity if the imperial records were to be believed. Perhaps this was some sort of buffer around his palace established for security? Or sacred ground to the Destara that only a select few were normally permitted to set foot in. If so, that would explain the distinct lack of life that he'd encountered thus far in his quest.

Certainly if this area held some kind of reverence then it stood to reason that a space port

would not be located here. But out there among the common rabble he would almost certainly find what he was seeking.

All he had to do was figure out how to get across unnoticed...

He studied the area for several minutes, observing the two sentries and their patterns. Both moved little, keeping a tight patrol circle along the opened gate. One would move one way while the other would go in the opposite direction. Neither were gone very long, however, before they returned to their starting points beside the opening.

He eased forward slowly, keeping to cover as best he could. He was about twenty feet from the opening and behind the nearest pillar he could find before it opened up to gateway proper. Once he moved beyond here there would be nowhere to hide and no turning back.

He had timed out their routines and hoped he could slip through in the small window of time he'd have before they returned to their starting position. He began to move when a noise caught his attention and he froze in place.

A large vehicle hovered into the opening and stopped, resulting in the two guards moving to intercept it. The pilot conversed with them in their native tongue, explaining whatever his purpose for being there was.

Jakhob used the opportunity to rush behind the guards and slip past unnoticed. Neither gave any notice of his presence nor did the Destara they were questioning.

He moved at a jog, putting as much distance between himself and the entrance. He had no intention of getting caught due to negligence on his part.

After several more minutes, he was clear of the area all together. In its stead was a newer and much busier area than the previous one. Many Destara moved about freely, conversing and carrying on their usual routines. He had to duck behind some nearby crates to avoid being noticed.

In the nearby distance, he observed a transport of some kind rocketing skyward and realized his ultimate goal must be closer than he realized.

It took him another half hour of careful maneuvering to avoid being seen by the now-bountiful cybernetic population all about him. He used every bit of cover to work his way slowly toward his destination but with enough persistence he finally made it.

He moved through an unguarded partition and noticed a vast complex inset below him. The interconnected structure was partly on the surface but quickly descended into a large pit below. The pit contained several runways running into a series of launch bays beyond it on the far side. Doubtlessly, the location of a ship he might be able to stow away on.

It took further time to make his way to the far end and the bays but he knew he had to be careful. He was too close to his goal now to be caught due to carelessness.

When he got above the bays, he immediately located a bank of air shafts. With a little work he was able to pry the grill off one and slip inside.

There was a slight drop from the opening to the shaft floor before it banked sharply to the right. He fell about five feet before landing loudly on the inside wall. He moved briskly after that, following the shaft about fifteen more feet before coming to another junction.

The shaft dipped down abruptly once more and he positioned himself as best he could before dropping down to the next section. His landing was decent but unavoidably loud. He hoped no one detected his presence from all the noise he'd made. Given that it was a launch area though, it was quite possible the noise of the ships had drowned out any sound he'd produced.

He followed the shaft to its end where it came out facing the inside of a large launch bay.

He was fortunate the shaft was straight-on and didn't dip or he would've had to risk falling through it completely and taking his chances on where he landed. This angle gave him the ability to see what was below and, hopefully, plan out where he would land.

The bay beyond was large and there were at least six vessels of varying sizes docked there. Three were interceptors like the Renegades had. One was some sort of gun ship he suspected while the two remaining ones were smaller ships—possibly some sort of short range shuttle. Two of the interceptors were closest to his current position and he suspected they would be the most logical targets.

The bay was busy with crews loading and unloading the vessels. Other Destara rushed about on errands of some sort, doubtlessly related to readying the ships for future travel. The noise was moderate but easily loud enough to mask anything he did in his hiding place.

He tested the vent cover with his hands, seeing how tight it was fastened. The steel plate didn't budge at all and he knew he'd have to try and cut through it. He just hoped no one noticed his efforts...

He fished in his bag and produced the laser welder. He switched it on and got to work, quickly melting away the bottom of the grate. With luck he could make it look like it was still fastened and whole but be able to slip through the loose section.

A moment later he had cut the metal enough to be able to push it and move it aside for his descent. He glanced below his position and noticed some crates were stocked against the wall a few feet below.

It would be a little bit tricky—if he landed too hard he might roll and fall off the edge to the deck below. The deck was possibly fifty feet below the top of the highest crate and he knew it would be instant death in that event.

He had to be careful.

Careful *and* precise.

He dropped the first bag down and it hit the middle of the crate with no trouble. He reached for the second and also tossed it down. It struck off-target and the bag bounced, settling precariously on the edge.

He silently cursed himself. He knew when he leapt the impact would certainly knock it loose and it would fall to the deck below. Unfortunately now that he'd given up his supplies he had no choice but to follow through anyway. If he lost his equipment and remaining rations he wouldn't last more than a day.

He sucked in a breath then pushed the grate open as wide as it would go and dropped. He felt the blood rushing through his body and his heart pounding rapidly as he fell for an instant. Finally, he slammed into the crate top and rolled.

As expected, the second bag shook and slid loose, falling to the deck far below. He waited a moment then gazed after it, checking to see if it had attracted any attention.

Apparently no one had seen or heard it land. The nearest Destara continued counting the hover cart of equipment he had previously been working with.

The bag itself was still intact although he couldn't be certain about the condition of its contents. That bag had the rations and water canisters in it, fortunately, so he suspected they had made it through intact. The rations had been in plas-fabric pouches while the water had been in shatterproof steel canisters. Of course, the designers couldn't have anticipated such a drop when they'd made them so he couldn't be certain.

He gazed about making certain none of the Destara were looking his direction or planning

to come that way. Satisfied, he gathered up the other satchel and began his slow descent.

The crates were metallic and each one was seven feet in height by his estimate. He descended one at a time, leaping down as best he could from one to the other until he finally reached the top of the last one.

He rummaged in his bag and produced a particle rifle. Checking to make certain it was properly calibrated he dropped to the deck. He hoped to avoid any firefights but if that proved impossible he wanted to make certain he had enough punch to hit back.

Tiny needles stabbed his feet then, a physical reminder of the descent he'd just made. He summoned up the will to ignore it. This was no time for pain. In battle, weakness got one killed.

His tactical skills kicked in then and he moved as stealthily as he could toward the other bag he'd dropped.

He closed the distance swiftly and retrieved the second bag with no trouble. Satisfied with his success, he moved to the cover of two nearby crates and peered inside the satchel to see the state of his errant supplies.

The food ration packs were all safe to his relief. The three remaining water bottles were also still sealed although one had taken the brunt of the impact and become severely dented. He decided he'd have to investigate its contents later and see if the water was still safe to consume.

He gazed about to make certain the path was safe. Satisfied there was no one around, he dashed out and began his roundabout route toward one of the interceptors.

He knew the ship most likely wouldn't go back to Centaurai colony but even if he could make it safely to another organic world, he might stand a chance. According to the Destara database, water was a universal constant on worlds they'd conquered.

He'd made it half-way when he heard one of the workers exclaim something. He glanced up as one of them made eye contact and pointed in his direction. He raced behind cover but knew the damage had already been done.

He ducked out from behind the crate and opened fire as several Destara warriors moved down the aisle in his direction. He took out two of them before the remaining three could act. As they trained their weapons, he threw himself back out of the way, narrowly avoiding their volley.

He rushed through three crates and re-emerged at a different angle, firing as he did. His pursuers had also moved closer to his initial position but he still managed to down two more.

Unfortunately the commotion had attracted attention and many more warriors were descending on his position. It was only a matter of time until they got lucky.

He grunted angrily.

He'd been *so* close!

He watched as two dozen Destara warriors rushed toward him from his far right. Behind them, he realized, was an *E'ner'ge'i* fueling station for the ships. If he could get clear for just a moment, maybe he could hit it.

He dodged their energy blasts and projectiles by ducking down between the crates and sprinting further to their immediate left. He re-emerged and took aim at the fuel lines...

An energy blast flashed by him and burned his left side. He collapsed in a heap.

Pain seared his side, quickly traversing the length of his body. He ignored it as best he could and trained his rifle on the fuel depot. His vision was blurring over but he fired anyway, hoping to luck out.

The world exploded brilliantly, painting everything searing white and a roar overwhelmed every sense he had.

When he came back to consciousness he realized the chamber was destroyed. The crates behind him were on fire and everything where the attack force was had been incinerated in one fine stroke.

The ship he'd been hoping to board was also burned badly but, amazingly, still mostly intact. With a bit of work the Destara could likely make it space-worthy once more.

He heard more Destara on the opposite end of the ruined chamber and knew reinforcements were already on their way.

He winced in pain. It was difficult to ignore his body this time. He glanced down, seeing his flesh was blistered from the immense heat.

His grand scheme had failed. One way or the other he would die this day. Still, even he'd been impressed by what he'd done here. He'd survived all this time. Beaten the odds.

Just like Derec had.

He allowed himself a smile.

No one would ever know what he did here. They already thought him long dead. But *he* knew and that was all that mattered in the end, wasn't it? He'd taken control of his fate and battled the Universe itself for control of his destiny.

He'd lost. But not by much...

He dug in his weapons bag and armed his explosives. Satisfied they were ready, he waited for the Destara to come.

If he had to die, at least he would go out on his own terms.

Fighting to the last.

The Destara warriors emerged from behind the burned out crates. They were startled by his presence—certainly he was the last thing they'd expected to find.

They raised their weapons as he smiled one last time. He raised the remote switch in his fist and squeezed the trigger.

The world exploded again.

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