

The poster features a central, close-up image of Darth Vader's helmet, which is dark and highly reflective. Behind him, a collage of scenes from the movie is visible: on the left, Luke Skywalker in a blue vest; in the middle, Yoda's head; on the right, a Stormtrooper in full armor; and in the upper right, a large, metallic structure resembling the Death Star. The background is a dark, starry space.

STAR WARS[®] TRILOGY THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Ryder Windham

Based on the story by George Lucas
and the screenplay by Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan

Disney

STAR WARS®

E P I S O D E V

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PROLOGUE

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

During the Battle of Yavin, Sith Lord Darth Vader piloted his own Imperial TIE fighter to defend the Death Star space station against a Rebel Alliance assault. While engaged in a dogfight with an X-wing starfighter, he sensed the enemy pilot was strong with the Force. Vader was about to fire upon the X-wing when he and his two wingmen were attacked by a Corellian YT-1300 transport. Vader survived, but his damaged TIE fighter went spinning out of control. Seconds later, the Death Star was blown into a billion pieces.

After Darth Vader brought his crippled spacecraft to an Imperial outpost, he began his investigation. He did not have to identify the Corellian transport. He'd seen it before, when it had been captured by a Death Star tractor beam and deposited in hangar 3207. The transport had been readily identified as the *Millennium Falcon*: the same ship that had eluded Imperial soldiers on Tatooine during their search for an R2 unit that had carried the plans for the Death Star.

Among the *Millennium Falcon*'s passengers from Tatooine was Vader's former Jedi Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi. On the Death Star, Kenobi's allies succeeded in their mission to rescue Princess Leia Organa, the Rebel leader who'd placed the Death Star plans in the R2 unit. Because Darth Vader had once lived on Tatooine, he was nagged by two questions: How long had Obi-Wan been there? And why?

The lone Star Destroyer traveled silently across interstellar space with the precision of a massive dart. An *Imperial*-class warship, it measured 1,600 meters long from its aft ion engines to its sharp-tipped bow, and was equipped with enough firepower to reduce a civilization to ashes. Even without its sixty turbolaser batteries and equal number of ion cannons, the wedge-shaped starship looked like it was ready to cut through anything in its path. The ship's name was the *Avenger*; its commanding officer was Captain Needa.

The *Avenger* arrived at its designated coordinates, then deployed its cargo of hyperdrive pods from a recessed launch bay. Each 3.4-meter-long pod was programmed to travel thousands of light-years on a one-way trip to a specific destination, never to return to the *Avenger* or any other Imperial ship.

Across the galaxy, other Star Destroyers carried out the same task, releasing hyperdrive pods into space. Soon, thousands of pods were racing off to almost as many worlds, including planets and moons that had yet to be conquered by the Empire. Each pod contained a probot, a probe droid engineered for long-range covert surveillance. Each probot had a single purpose: to find the Rebel Alliance's new base.

The *Avenger*'s pods were targeted for three planetary systems: Allyuen, Tokmia, and Hoth. The Empire had little information regarding Allyuen and Tokmia, and only slightly more for Hoth, a blue-white sun that was orbited by six planets and a wide asteroid belt. According to an old navigational chart, Hoth's inner five planets were lifeless; the outermost planet—also named Hoth—was covered entirely by snow and ice, and was orbited by three nameless moons. Because of the sixth planet's thin atmosphere and close proximity to the asteroid field, it was also frequently battered by meteors.

Speeding through space, a pod arrived in orbit of the ice world. It automatically applied emergency braking thrusters, allowing Hoth's gravity to pull it down through the thin atmosphere. The pod streaked downward until its journey ended on the planet's surface, where it smashed through layers of snow and impacted along the upper slope of a high ravine.

As smoke billowed from the impact site and darkened the surrounding snow, the pod opened to reveal the probot's armored form. Equipped with a repulsorlift and silenced thrusters, the probot had a wide, sensor-laden head that rested upon a cylindrical support body, under which dangled four manipulator arms and a high-torque grasping arm. Although the probot's primary function was to gather and transmit data for the Empire, it was also equipped with a single defense blaster.

Activating its repulsorlift, the black probot rose up through the smoke and went immediately to work. It used its sensors to scan for Alliance transmissions and to survey the terrain, seeking signs of life and habitation. The probot hovered momentarily as it gathered and analyzed data, then moved on, gliding noiselessly through the chilled air...unknowingly coming closer and closer to the Rebel base.

Luke Skywalker, wearing an Alliance-issued insulated patrol suit, rode his two-legged snow lizard, a tauntaun, over a windswept ice slope on Hoth. A thin layer of snow had built up on Luke's protective

green-lensed goggles, so he momentarily released one gloved hand from the reins to swipe at the goggles and clear his vision.

Luke was looking for wild tauntauns, wampa ice monsters, and any other of Hoth's few indigenous creatures. Sensors were being planted for the Alliance's regional warning network, which would anticipate Imperial or alien intruders, and it was Luke's job to make sure that no native beasts might accidentally damage them. But from what Luke could see, there wasn't any sign of life amidst the frozen wastes, not even tracks. In every direction, all he saw was white.

Luke felt about as far as he could get from his homeworld, the desert planet Tatooine—not merely because of the great distance between the two planets or their dramatically different climates. So much had changed since he'd joined the Rebellion. He was no longer the boy who'd felt stuck on a moisture farm, who only dreamed of adventures on far-off worlds. He had become a warrior, a hero of the Rebel Alliance, and his adventures had exceeded his dreams.

Yet the price had been unfortunately high. Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were dead. So was his childhood friend Biggs Darklighter, along with many other brave Rebel pilots who'd fought in the Battle of Yavin. Luke remembered them all, but tried not to think about them too much. It was more in his nature to think of the future than dwell on the past.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Ben, the Jedi Knight, who had served so briefly as Luke's mentor in the ways of the Force.

I still miss him, Luke thought. I wish I'd gotten to know him better on Tatooine, even though Uncle Owen would have tried to stop me. I could have learned so much....

Luke knew he needed to focus on his assignment, so he pushed aside his thoughts and guided the tauntaun along a snow-covered ridge. He reined the gray-furred beast to a stop, and it exhaled through its lower pair of nostrils, steaming the air and fogging Luke's goggles. Luke lifted the goggles over his cap's visor, then squinted at the surrounding whiteness.

His keen eyes sighted a streak of light that plummeted from the sky and slammed into the top of a nearby slope, close enough that he could hear the impact. Luke removed his electrobinoculars from his utility belt and peered through the lenses to see a magnified image of smoke rising from the impact site. Just another meteorite on Hoth? Luke wasn't sure.

He lowered the electrobinoculars and returned them to his belt, then brushed snow from the back of his left glove to reveal a comlink transmitter. As he activated the transmitter, his tauntaun shifted nervously beneath him.

"Echo Three to Echo Seven," Luke said into the comlink. "Han, old buddy, do you read me?"

Luke listened to some brief static, then heard the familiar voice of his friend, Han Solo. "Loud and clear, kid. What's up?"

Luke looked around, trying to catch sight of Han, who was also riding a tauntaun. Han's assignment had been to plant the warning sensors.

Luke said, "Well, I finished my circle. I don't pick up any life readings."

"There isn't enough life on this ice cube to fill a space cruiser," Han commented over the comlink. Luke grinned, then caught a brief glimpse of Han's mounted figure before he vanished into the snowy distance. As he departed, Han added, "The sensors are placed. I'm going back."

"Right," Luke said. "I'll see you shortly. There's a meteorite that hit the ground near here. I want to check it out. It won't take long."

Luke switched off his comlink, and his tauntaun snorted nervously. "Hey, steady, girl," he said, reining back. "Hey, what's the matter? You smell something?"

Suddenly, there was a monstrous howl. Luke turned quickly to face a massive wampa, its jaws flung open to display fiercely sharp teeth. A huge, clawed paw slammed into Luke, knocking him from his saddle. He was unconscious before he hit the snow.

Echo Base, the comm-unit designation for the Alliance's command headquarters on Hoth, was a vast network of passages and caves concealed within a glacial mountain. Some of the underground chambers had formed naturally over thousands of years, but most had been carved from the ice in a matter of weeks, thanks to the Alliance Corps of Engineers and their industrial lasers. The base had quickly become home to several thousand Rebel soldiers, technicians, and pilots. It also served as the temporary accommodations for two lapsed mercenaries: Han Solo, captain of the *Millennium Falcon*, and his first mate, Chewbacca the Wookiee.

Although Han and Chewbacca had worked steadily with the Alliance in the three years since the Battle of Yavin, neither had formally enlisted. This was one reason why Han, unlike Luke, wore a dark, fur-lined heavy-weather parka instead of an Alliance uniform. The other reason was that Han thought he looked better in his own clothes.

Returning from his assignment, Han rode his tauntaun up to the mouth of an enormous ice cave, the north entrance of Echo Base. He kept the tauntaun moving at a fast trot as they entered.

The cave had been transformed into a low-ceilinged hangar for starships. Dozens of Rebel soldiers were at work, some busily securing the base while others worked on vehicles. Han steered his tauntaun past a group of Rebel troopers who were unloading supplies, and brought the tauntaun to a stop next to a pair of waiting handlers. They grabbed the beast's reins, and Han dismounted in one smooth motion. Landing on the snow-covered floor, he felt a stinging sensation in his legs, which—despite his insulated boots and leggings—were cold and stiff from riding. As he stepped away from his tauntaun, he pushed his parka's hood back, removed his snow goggles, and kept moving to get the blood circulating in his legs.

Han walked deeper into the hangar. He passed teams of technicians who were adding repulsor-coil heaters to T-47 airspeeders to prevent the motors from freezing, effectively transforming the vehicles into what the Rebels had nicknamed "snowspeeders." A battle-damaged X-wing was also under repair. Han had to be careful not to bump into any Rebels or trip over an astromech droid as he stepped over the power cables that snaked across the floor.

Han finally reached his own ship, the heavily modified Corellian transport. From the hangar floor, he looked up to see Chewbacca sitting atop the *Falcon's* starboard mandible. Chewbacca, a tall brown-furred Wookiee, was using one hand to shield his eyes with a pair of welding goggles—the goggles' strap was too small to fit around the Wookiee's broad head—while the other hand operated the fusioncutter. Sparks flew where the fusioncutter's plasma beam met the *Falcon's* hull.

"Chewie!" Han called out, but the Wookiee didn't stop working. "Chewie!" he called again—to no avail. Either the surrounding noise was too much or the Wookiee was ignoring him. "Chewie!" he yelled a third time.

The Wookiee lowered the goggles and unleashed a series of harsh, irritated growls.

"All right, don't lose your temper," Han said. "I'll come right back and give you a hand."

Han changed out of his cold-weather gear, which reeked of the tauntaun's oily fur, and put on fresh clothes, including a black, long-sleeved jacket that went well with his frame. After changing, he walked through a narrow-walled passage and stepped down into the Echo Base command center.

Laser-cut skylights in the low, icy ceiling provided natural illumination for the room. Han looked around and saw Rebel controllers and droids setting up electronic equipment and monitoring radar

signals. Most of the comm-scan computer stations, flat-screen monitors, and even the chairs had been used on Yavin 4, but because of Hoth's climate, the command center was more tightly packed to conserve heat. All the Rebels wore white insulated uniforms, gloves, and gray snowboots.

Han caught sight of Princess Leia Organa, who wore a heated vest over her white jumpsuit. She looked away from her console and spotted him immediately. He held her gaze for a second before he broke eye contact.

The commander of the Alliance ground and fleet forces in the Hoth star system, General Rieekan, glanced up from a console and said, "Solo?"

"No sign of life out there, General," Han reported. "The sensors are in place. You'll know if anything comes around."

Rieekan, looking tired and older than his years, read the data displayed on the console as he asked, "Commander Skywalker reported in yet?"

"No," Han said. "He's checking out a meteorite that hit near him."

"With all the meteorite activity in this system, it's going to be difficult to spot approaching ships," Rieekan said, his eyes still on the console.

"General, I've got to leave," Han said. "I can't stay here anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well, there's a price on my head. If I don't pay off Jabba the Hutt, I'm a dead man." Han didn't have to explain further. Everyone at Echo Station knew that Han had been a smuggler, and that one former client—a notorious Hutt crimelord on Tatooine—had placed a bounty on his head after he'd failed to reimburse the Hutt for a spice shipment he'd dumped to avoid Imperial arrest. The Alliance had given Han more than enough credits to repay Jabba, but the Rebels had also kept him very busy since the Battle of Yavin. Unfortunately, Hutts were not known for their patience.

"A death mark's not an easy thing to live with," Rieekan commented. Looking away from the console, he faced Han. "You're a good fighter, Solo. I hate to lose you." The two men shook hands.

"Thank you, General," Han said. As he turned away from Rieekan, he caught the gaze of Princess Leia again. There was tension in her face, somehow made more severe by the way her hair was braided and tied across her head. Looking at her expression, Han had no trouble imagining she was concerned about him.

Han approached Leia and said, "Well, Your Highness. I guess this is it."

"That's right," Leia replied, her voice cooler than the air.

Taken aback, Han said, "Well, don't get all mushy on me. So long, Princess." He turned away and walked straight for an adjoining laser-cut corridor.

"Han!" Leia shouted, following him into the hall.

Han stopped and turned to face her. "Yes, Your Highnessness?"

"I thought you had decided to stay," Leia said, her voice betraying her disappointment in his decision.

"Well, the bounty hunter we ran into on Ord Mantell changed my mind."

"Han, we need you!"

Han gave her a quizzical look, and echoed, "We need?"

"Yes."

"Oh, what about *you* need?"

“I need?” Leia said, apparently baffled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Fed up, Han shook his head. “You probably don’t.” He turned away and headed off through the corridor.

Walking fast to follow Han, Leia said, “And what precisely am I supposed to know?”

Without breaking his stride, Han kept his eyes forward and said, “Come on! You want me to stay because of the way you feel about me.”

“Yes,” Leia said from behind. “You’re a great help to us. You’re a natural leader—”

Han stopped and whirled on Leia. “No!” he said, jabbing a finger at her for emphasis. “That’s not it. Come on.” Leia gaped. Han grinned, then raised a thumb to gesture at his face and said, “Aahhh—uh-huh! Come on.”

Leia stared at him for a moment, then said, “You’re imagining things.”

“Am I?” Han said. “Then why are you following me? Afraid I was going to leave without giving you a good-bye kiss?”

Outraged, Leia spat out, “I’d just as soon kiss a Wookiee.”

“I can arrange that,” Han replied. As he turned and stormed off down the corridor, he added, “You could use a good kiss!”

Struck speechless, Leia stood there and watched him go. What could she say to him that she hadn’t said before? *We’re at war with the Empire, she thought. There’s so much at stake for the Rebellion. I don’t have time for...for Han Solo’s nonsense!*

Later at Echo Station, the golden droid C-3PO and his astromech counterpart, R2-D2, walked through a corridor that led to the main hangar. As they rounded a corner, R2-D2 emitted a flurry of accusatory beeps.

“Don’t try to blame me,” C-3PO replied testily. “I didn’t ask you to turn on the thermal heater. I merely commented that it was freezing in the princess’s chamber.”

R2-D2 rotated his domed head and responded with a defensive beep, prompting C-3PO to exclaim, “But it’s *supposed* to be freezing. How are we going to dry out all her clothes? I really don’t know.”

R2-D2 beeped in protest, which only made C-3PO more agitated. “Oh, switch off,” he said as they entered the hangar.

They approached the *Millennium Falcon*, where they found Han and Chewbacca working on the freighter’s central lifters. Han was back in his cold-weather gear, which was now soiled with grime and oil as well as smelling of tauntaun.

“Why did you take this apart now?” Han yelled at Chewbacca. “I’m trying to get us out of here, and you pull both of these—” Words failing him, he gestured at the lifters.

“Excuse me, sir,” C-3PO interrupted.

Han said to Chewbacca, “Put them back together right now.”

C-3PO tried again. “Might I have a word with you, please?”

“What do you want?” Han snapped, not bothering to hide his irritation.

“Well, it’s Princess Leia, sir. She’s been trying to get you on the communicator.”

“I turned it off,” Han said, staring down the droid. “I don’t want to talk to her.” The way Han said it, he made it clear that he wanted this conversation to end immediately.

“Oh,” said C-3PO. “Well, Princess Leia is wondering about Master Luke. He hasn’t come back yet. She doesn’t know where he is.”

“I don’t know where he is either,” Han fumed, angered that the droid wasn’t gone already.

“Nobody knows where he is,” C-3PO stated.

That got Han’s attention. “What do you mean, ‘nobody knows’?”

C-3PO stammered, “Well, uh, you see...”

“Deck officer!” Han called out, looking away from C-3PO to find the Rebel officer in charge of docking bay operations. “Deck officer!”

“Excuse me, sir,” C-3PO interjected. “Might I inqu—”

Han abruptly put his hand over C-3PO’s mouth as the deck officer ran to them. The deck officer looked at Han and said, “Yes, sir?”

“Do you know where Commander Skywalker is?”

“I haven’t seen him. It’s possible he came in through the south entrance.”

“‘It’s possible’?” Han repeated skeptically, and the deck officer realized how feeble his statement had sounded. Han continued, “Why don’t you go find out? It’s getting dark out there.”

“Yes, sir,” answered the deck officer, who ran off to find his assistant.

Han removed his hand from C-3PO’s mouth. The droid said, “Excuse me, sir. Might I inquire what’s going on?”

Concerned and not really listening, Han replied, “Why not?”

Han sauntered off, leaving Chewbacca and the droids behind. C-3PO shook his head and said, “Impossible man. Come along, Artoo, let’s find Princess Leia. Between ourselves, I think Master Luke is in considerable danger.”

Han made his way to the chamber where the tauntauns were stabled, near the base’s north entrance. Several exhausted Rebel scouts rested in the ice-walled chamber...but Luke wasn’t among them. Han was trying to think of where else Luke might be when the deck officer and his assistant hurried toward him.

“Sir,” said the deck officer. “Commander Skywalker hasn’t come in the south entrance. He might have forgotten to check in.”

“Not likely,” Han said. “Are the speeders ready?”

“Er, not yet,” said the deck officer. “We’re having some trouble adapting them to the cold.”

“Then we’ll have to go out on tauntauns,” Han said. Before anyone could protest, Han turned and headed for the snow lizards.

The deck officer was aghast. Tauntauns were indigenous, but they were hardly invulnerable to the cold, and what Han Solo was about to do was pure madness. Hoping to maintain some control of the situation, the deck officer called after Solo, “Sir, the temperature’s dropping too rapidly.”

“That’s right,” Han said without looking back. “And my friend’s out in it.”

As Han approached the tauntaun he’d ridden earlier, the assistant officer said, “I’ll cover sector twelve. Have comm control set to screen alpha.”

The deck officer watched Han climb onto the snow creature’s back and said, “Your tauntaun’ll freeze before you reach the first marker.”

“Then I’ll see you in hell!” Han replied. He dug his heels into the tauntaun’s side, and raced out of the cave into the bitter night.

Luke Skywalker didn't know if he'd emerged from unconsciousness on his own or in response to the wampa's echoing howl. As he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings, he knew he was in serious trouble.

He was hanging upside down. In a cave. His entire body hurt. And he was very, very cold.

He struggled to get his bearings. A chill against the back of his neck suggested the cave's entrance was behind him. Icy stalactites and stalagmites, resembling many rows of teeth, obscured his view of the cave's dim interior. He couldn't see the wampa, but he could hear the snap of bones breaking, and chewing sounds. Judging from what he heard, Luke knew the wampa wasn't very far away.

Straining his aching muscles, Luke twisted his torso and neck to look up at the cave's ceiling. His booted feet were embedded in the ice. He strained his arms up and tried to work his legs out, but the ice was too thick, and he didn't have any leverage. He let his body slump and stretched his arms down, but he was suspended just high enough that he couldn't touch the floor. To free himself, he'd have to blast his way out, or...

He remembered his lightsaber. He reached to his belt, but the lightsaber was gone. *Oh, no! Don't tell me it's lost!* Luke angled his head, and spotted the lightsaber half buried in the snow on the floor below him.

He stretched out his arm, but the lightsaber was beyond his reach. Fortunately, Luke had another resource: the Force.

According to Ben, the Force was an energy field created by all living things. It surrounded and penetrated everything, binding the galaxy together. Since the Battle of Yavin, Luke had also learned that the Force could be utilized for moving small objects.

Still suspended from the cave's ceiling, Luke extended his right hand toward the lightsaber. He tried to envision the weapon rising from the snow and arriving into his waiting glove. But nothing happened.

Luke was far from mastering the Force, or even fully understanding it, but he had a feeling that he might be trying too hard. He closed his eyes and relaxed his muscles. He also did his best to remain calm, for in the recesses of his awareness, he sensed that the wampa was moving in the cave. *Did the wampa hear me trying to wrench myself free of the ice?* Luke no longer heard the sound of the creature's chewing.

Luke stopped thinking about the wampa. Again, he extended his hand and gazed upon the lightsaber in the snow. *The Force binds us....*

He heard the approaching wampa's heavy footsteps.

The Force calls my lightsaber to me....

The lightsaber shot out of the snow and into Luke's hand. Luke activated the weapon, and its blue

energy beam blazed to life. As he raised the blade to cut through the ice that bound his legs, the wampa lunged for him.

The lightsaber sliced through the ice, and Luke kept the weapon activated as he tumbled to the cave's floor. He sprang to his feet just as the wampa was about to pounce, and swung the lightsaber hard. In a single motion, he cut off the monster's right arm. The severed limb landed on the snow with a muffled thud. Howling in pain, the wampa clutched at its open wound.

Not wasting a precious second, Luke deactivated the lightsaber and scurried away from the wailing beast. He moved by instinct, pushing his way through snow and ice until he tumbled out through the mouth of the cave and into...

A blizzard.

When I wanted to leave Tatooine, I never bargained for this.

Dazed and lost, Luke pressed on, leaving the cave far behind as he moved deeper into the storm.

The snowfall was increasingly heavy at Echo Base, where R2-D2 stood just outside the base's north entrance. Ignoring the cold flakes that were collecting on his cylindrical body, the astromech adjusted the slender scanner antenna that protruded up from a panel on his domed head. The antenna was topped by a life-scan sensor, and even though he hadn't picked up any signals so far, R2-D2 wasn't ready to give up. Still, he couldn't help but emit some worried beeps.

"You must come along now, Artoo," said C-3PO, who'd been standing watch with his friend. "There's really nothing more we can do. And my joints are freezing up."

R2-D2 beeped, long and low.

"Don't say things like that!" C-3PO cried. "Of course we'll see Master Luke again. And he'll be quite all right, you'll see." As C-3PO turned and headed back through the hangar entrance, he muttered, "Stupid little short-circuit. He'll be quite all right."

R2-D2 let out a mournful beep, but remained outside, sensors on full alert.

Except for his own gloved hands and the back of his tauntaun's head, Han Solo could barely see anything but falling snow. He knew that finding Luke in this environment was next to impossible, but if he didn't try, Luke was as good as dead.

So Han continued looking and kept the tauntaun moving. Eventually, they arrived near a glacial rise that shielded them slightly from the wind. There, Han let the animal rest while he dismounted, carrying a portable scanner from his utility pack.

Han extended the scanner's antennae and tried to pick up any readings. There were no life-forms within the scanner's limited range and no incoming comm transmissions, but there was plenty of interference from the storm. Han carried the scanner back to the tauntaun and climbed onto his saddle.

In the hangar at Echo Base, a Rebel lieutenant walked up to his commanding officer, Major Derlin, and said, "Sir, all the patrols are in. Still no—"

Major Derlin raised a hand to caution the lieutenant, who then noticed that Princess Leia stood nearby, watching them and listening. The lieutenant gulped, chose his words carefully, and said, "Still no contact from Skywalker or Solo."

Chewbacca, R2-D2, and C-3PO were near the cave's entrance. Hearing the lieutenant's report, C-3PO turned and approached the princess. "Mistress Leia, Artoo says he's been quite unable to pick up any signals, although he does admit that his own range is far too weak to abandon all hope."

Major Derlin said, “Your Highness, there’s nothing more we can do tonight. The shield doors must be closed.”

Leia wished she could blink her eyes and wake up from this nightmare, but she knew she wasn’t dreaming. Luke and Han really were out there somewhere in sub-freezing temperatures, and unless she wanted the cold to spread throughout Echo Base, the shield doors couldn’t remain open. She found herself speechless, and cast her gaze at the floor as she nodded to Major Derlin. It had to be done.

“Close the doors,” Derlin ordered.

“Yes, sir,” said the lieutenant.

At the mouth of the cave, two thick metal doors rumbled along their tracks as they converged to close off the entrance. Chewbacca moaned, and R2-D2 spat out a complex series of beeps.

Addressing Leia, C-3PO said, “Artoo says the chances of survival are seven hundred and twenty-five...to one.”

With a loud boom, the doors locked in place and sealed off the cavern. Chewbacca threw his head back and let out a suffering howl.

C-3PO reconsidered his last statement, and added, “Actually, Artoo has been known to make mistakes...from time to time.”

Leia walked off, and C-3PO returned to R2-D2. “Oh, dear, oh, dear,” said the golden droid. He patted R2-D2’s dome, trying to comfort the distressed astromech. “Don’t worry about Master Luke, I’m sure he’ll be all right. He’s quite clever, you know...for a human being.”

Luke lay facedown in the snow, nearly unconscious. He didn’t want to give up, but the cold had given him little choice. Unable to move or feel, and barely able to think, he was waiting for the inevitable when he heard a voice.

“Luke...Luke.”

Luke recognized the voice. He hadn’t heard it since the Battle of Yavin, when it had urged him to trust his feelings and use the Force to destroy the Death Star. Slowly, Luke raised his head. A short distance away from him stood the shimmering, spectral form of Obi-Wan Kenobi. To make sure he wasn’t hallucinating, Luke said aloud, “Ben?”

“You will go to the Dagobah system,” Ben said.

“Dagobah system?” Luke repeated. *I’m not hallucinating. I’m sure of it.*

“There you will learn from Yoda, the Jedi Master who instructed me.”

Luke groaned as he tried not to go into shock. “Ben...Ben.”

Ben disappeared—but a lone tauntaun rider materialized where he had been and approached Luke’s position. Luke’s eyes closed and he passed out in the snow.

Fortunately for Luke, the tauntaun rider was not a hallucination, either. Han Solo slid off his mount and trudged as fast as he could to Luke’s motionless body. Behind him, his tauntaun let out a low, pitiful bellow.

“Luke!” Han said, taking hold of his friend. “Luke! Don’t do this, Luke. Come on, give me a sign here.” He leaned close to Luke’s face to make sure he was still breathing. He was, but just barely.

Han was trying to think about what to do next when he heard a rasping sound. He turned in time to see his tauntaun stagger and fall dead to the snow-covered ground.

Temporarily stunned, Han stared at the fallen tauntaun. Then he grabbed Luke’s arms and dragged him to the tauntaun’s body. “Not much time,” he muttered. He knew he’d have to work fast,

before the tauntaun's corpse froze.

Luke moaned, "Ben...Ben..."

Han figured Luke was delirious. "Hang on, kid," he said. He took Luke's lightsaber, ignited its blade, and cut the dead Tauntaun's belly wide open.

"Dagobah system..." Luke mumbled. "You will go to Dagobah..."

Struggling to get Luke inside the carcass, Han explained, "This may smell bad, kid...but it will keep you warm...till I can get the shelter built."

Oblivious to everything, Luke moaned, "Yoda..."

"Agh!" Han gasped as the gutted beast's rancid stench swam over him. "Agh...I thought they smelled bad on the outside! *Agh!*"

With Luke tucked more or less into the tauntaun's body cavity, Han removed a pack and took out a shelter container. The shelter would offer pitiful protection against the bitter cold...but it was all Han had.

The next morning offered clear blue skies for the Rebel pilots who raced over Hoth in the four snub-nosed T-47 snowspeeders—enclosed two-man craft that allowed a pilot and gunner to be seated back-to-back. Each of these four carried only a single pilot, to allow room for Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, should either be found. After skirting a high plateau, the snowspeeders veered off in different directions to search for the missing men.

Rebel pilot Zev Senesca's comm-unit designation was Rogue Two. Zev had been on Hoth long enough to have a hard time believing anyone could've survived the previous night's blizzard. Also, the war had claimed too many lives for Zev to be much of an optimist. He was grimly concentrating on the scopes that ringed his cockpit when he heard a low beep from a monitor. Activating his transmitter, he called out, "Echo Base...I've got something! Not much, but it could be a life-form..."

Zev banked his craft, made a slow arc, then raced off in a new direction. Switching to a different transmission frequency, he said, "Commander Skywalker, do you copy? This is Rogue Two." No response. "This is Rogue Two. Captain Solo, do you copy?"

"Good morning," Han's voice sounded from a speaker in Zev's cockpit. "Nice of you guys to drop by."

It had been weeks since Zev had felt any reason to smile, but the one that broke out across his face went from ear to ear. "Echo Base...this is Rogue Two. I found them. Repeat, I found them." He steered the snowspeeder to follow the source of Han's transmission, and soon sighted Han's emergency shelter. Han stood beside the shelter and waved, safe at last.

Luke wondered, *Am I dead?*

His whole body felt empty, drained of life, yet there was a lightness about him. *I feel like I'm floating. But what's that pressure over my mouth and...is something pinching my nose? And what are those whirring noises?* Opening his eyes, he saw blurred lights and rising air bubbles, and thought, *I'm drowning!*

He had emerged from unconsciousness to find himself submerged in a transparent cylindrical tank filled with warm liquid. A breathing mask was strapped over his mouth and a small clamp sealed his nostrils. From Luke's perspective, the tank's shape produced a distorted view of strange figures moving outside. But as his vision adjusted, Luke recognized the figures as 2-1B, an older medical droid that served the Rebel Alliance, and his assistant, the multiarmed droid FX-7. It was FX-7 who

was responsible for the whirring sounds.

Luke realized he was in the Echo Base medical center, and that the liquid in the tank was bacta, synthetic chemical that made wounds heal quickly and left no scars. Luke's last conscious memory was of Ben, appearing before him in the snow. *Who rescued me? And how?*

Then he saw his friends. Leia, Han, Chewbacca, R2-D2, and C-3PO were gathered on the other side of the medical center's window. They waved to him. Still groggy, Luke returned the gesture, then felt his body being lifted out of the tank.

It was time to return to the world.

"Master Luke, sir, it's so good to see you fully functional again," C-3PO said to Luke, who now sat on a bed in the medical center's white-walled recovery room. Leia smiled as R2-D2 rolled up beside Luke's bed and beeped.

"Artoo expresses his relief also," C-3PO translated.

Luke was by no means fully functional. He was tired and sore, and his battered features were nasty evidence of his encounter with the wampa. But he was alive and he would heal.

Behind Luke, the door slid open with a soft hiss, and Han and Chewbacca entered.

Han asked, "How you feeling, kid? You don't look so bad to me. In fact, you look strong enough to pull the ears off a gundark."

Luke grinned. "Thanks to you."

"That's two you owe me, junior," Han said, referring to the Battle of Yavin, when he'd prevented Darth Vader from shooting down Luke's starfighter.

Han swiveled to lean against the foot of Luke's bed and face Leia. "Well, Your Worship, looks like you managed to keep me around for a little while longer."

"I had nothing to do with it," Leia retorted. "General Rieekan thinks it's dangerous for any ships to leave the system until we've activated the energy shield." Indeed, the Rebels had been working round-the-clock on the power generators so the energy shields would be ready when needed.

"That's a good story," Han said. "I think you just can't bear to let a gorgeous guy like me out of your sight."

In bed, Luke grimaced. Han was his friend, but the *Millennium Falcon's* captain was also so full of himself that he could be unbearable. *How can Han talk to Leia that way? She's a princess! Sometimes I wish he would just keep his mouth shut.*

Coolly glaring at Solo, Leia slowly shook her head and said, "I don't know where you get your delusions, laserbrain."

Chewbacca tilted his head back and produced an amused, gurgling bark.

"Laugh it up, fuzzball," Han said reproachfully. "But you didn't see us alone in the south passage." He moved toward Leia and slinked an arm around her back. "She expressed her true feelings for me."

Stunned, Luke's eyes darted from Han to Leia and back to Han. *Is Han serious? Does Leia really want...?*

"My...!" Leia gasped, her temper boiling over. Han eased away from Leia as she released a barrage: "Why, you stuck-up...half-witted...scruffy-looking...nerf herder!"

"Who's scruffy-looking?" Han asked, looking genuinely insulted. Then he turned to Luke and said, "I must have hit pretty close to the mark to get her all riled up like that, huh, kid?"

But Luke wouldn't meet Han's gaze. He was too angry. Even the droids sensed the tension in the air.

Leia composed herself, then moved closer to Luke's bed. Looking at Han, she said, "Why, I guess you don't know everything about women yet." Then she leaned over Luke and kissed him on the lips.

Luke thought, *Huh?*

C-3PO, who had been standing just behind Han, nearly tripped over himself to get a better view. After seeing that Leia and Luke were indeed in an embrace, the baffled droid redirected his gaze from Chewbacca to Han to see their reaction. Chewbacca made a curious whimpering sound. Han did his best to keep his expression relaxed and neutral, as if seeing Leia and Luke interested him only mildly.

The kiss lasted about three seconds.

Leia pulled away from Luke. She looked at Han, who kept his expression neutral as he met her gaze. Then, without any further word, Leia walked to the door and left the room.

Han turned his casual gaze to Luke. Luke put his hands behind his head and leaned back into his bed, trying hard to keep a smug smile from his face. *Well, Han, do you have anything to say now?*

From a loudspeaker, a voice announced, "Headquarters personnel, report to command center."

Han glanced at Chewbacca, who tilted his furry head at the door. Trying not to look relieved at the opportunity to make an exit, Han tapped Luke's arm and said, "Take it easy," then followed Chewbacca out of the room.

Ever polite, C-3PO added, "Excuse us, please," and trotted after R2-D2, leaving Luke alone.

Walking fast, Han arrived first at the command center, followed by Leia, Chewbacca, and the droids. Inside the dim, low-ceilinged room, General Rieekan stood beside Wyron Serper, the center's senior controller, who was seated before a console screen. Seeing Leia, General Rieekan said, "Princess... we have a visitor."

The group gathered around the console screen and examined a comm-scan display map of Echo Base and its surrounding areas. On the map, a small, unidentified blip appeared to the north. Rieekan said, "We've picked up something outside the base of zone twelve, moving east."

"It's metal," Serper reported.

"Then it couldn't be one of those creatures," Leia said, referring to the wampas.

"It could be a speeder, one of ours," Han suggested.

Serper raised a hand to adjust a control on his headset. "No," he said. "Wait—there's something very weak coming through." Serper switched on an audio speaker, allowing the others to hear the intercepted transmission, a strange series of choppy electronic noises.

Looking to Rieekan, C-3PO said, "Sir, I am fluent in six million forms of communication. This signal is not used by the Alliance. It could be an Imperial code."

With that possibility in mind, the gathered Rebels listened even more attentively to the signal. After several seconds, Han decided, "It isn't friendly, whatever it is." Without waiting for the general or anyone else to issue an order, Han turned to his first mate and said, "Come on, Chewie, let's check it out."

As Han and Chewbacca headed for the hangar, Rieekan thought they might require backup. To Serper, Rieekan said, "Send Rogues Ten and Eleven to station three-eight."

Trouble had arrived.

When the Imperial probot was finished sending its message, it retracted its two high-frequency transmission antennae down into its sensor head. Then the droid hovered away from its hiding place behind a wide snowdrift, where its telescopic sensors had maintained an unobstructed view of the Rebels' power generator.

The probot was heading down a ridge toward the Rebel base when its sensors detected movement by a nearby snowbank. The probot spun its sensor head and directed its primary visual sensors at the snowbank, where a Wookiee's snow-covered head had popped up.

Chewbacca ducked as the droid fired three rapid laser bursts. The laser bolts missed the Wookiee and bored into the snowbank.

But Chewbacca was just a decoy, and Han—concealed behind a rise of glacial rock—was right behind the droid. While the droid was still distracted, Han rose and snapped off a quick shot at the droid's hovering form. Unlike the droid, Han didn't miss.

The fired bolt slammed into the droid but barely dented its metal plating. The droid responded by quickly rotating its cylindrical body in midair and firing back at Han. But Han had already ducked and the droid missed again.

Han came up fast and fired a second blast at the droid, again meeting his mark. After the way the droid had taken his first shot, Han knew he'd be lucky if he could disable it. So he was surprised when—a moment after his second shot hit the droid—the droid exploded into smoke and flames, leaving nothing behind but a fine spray of black-metal dust across the snow.

In the command center, General Rieekan stood next to Leia, who sat at a comm console and listened to Han's report. From the comlink, Han's voice said, "Fraid there's not much left."

"What was it?" Leia asked.

"Droid of some kind," Han answered. "I didn't hit it that hard. It must have had a self-destruct."

"An Imperial probe droid," Leia deduced.

Han said, "It's a good bet the Empire knows we're here."

It had been anything but easy for the Rebels to establish a base on Hoth. But if there were even a slight possibility that the Empire knew the location of Echo Base, no one was safe on the ice planet. With grim resolve, Rieekan said, "We'd better start the evacuation."

Many light-years away from Hoth, five Imperial Star Destroyers and their respective TIE fighter escorts rendezvoused in space. Despite the immense size of each Star Destroyer, all fell under the shadow of an even more enormous ship: the *Super-class* Star Destroyer, *Executor*.

At 8,000 meters long, the *Executor* was the largest traditional starship constructed by the Imperial Navy. Only the Death Star space station had been larger. Equipped with more than a thousand weapons, the *Executor* carried 144 TIE fighters and 38,000 stormtroopers. And all were at the disposal of the ship's commander: Darth Vader, Lord of the Sith.

Clad entirely in black, with a helmet that completely concealed his head and a cape that reached the floor, Darth Vader was darker than deepest space. On the *Executor's* bridge, he stood before a transparisteel viewport and surveyed his fleet. Because the *Executor* was protected by a powerful shielding force field, the bridge was positioned at the bow—usually the most vulnerable area of a starship—and offered Vader a panoramic view unobstructed by any part of his ship.

Behind Vader, a long walkway extended to the captain's control station. The walkway was without railings, and on either side the floor dropped off to expose the bridge's lower level. There, gray-uniformed Imperial technicians operated their console stations, and tried not to look up to find themselves eye level with Darth Vader's boots.

A door opened near the captain's station, and Vader's two chief officers—the pompous Admiral Ozzel and the younger, powerfully built General Veers—entered the bridge. Like all high-ranking Imperial officers, Ozzel and Veers wore gray uniforms and caps, as well as black leather gloves, belt and boots. They were approaching the walkway that led to Vader when the *Executor's* captain called out, "Admiral."

"Yes, Captain?" Ozzel answered, turning with Veers to face Captain Piett, a lean man with eyes that appeared tired from staring at monitors.

"I think we've got something, sir," Piett informed him. "The report is only a fragment from a probe droid in the Hoth system, but it's the best lead we've had."

Unimpressed, Ozzel snapped, "We have thousands of probe droids searching the galaxy. I want proof, not leads!"

But Piett wasn't finished. He added, "The visuals indicate life readings."

"It could mean anything," Ozzel said, growing impatient with Piett. "If we followed up every lead..."

"But sir," Piett interrupted, "the Hoth system is supposed to be devoid of human forms."

"You found something?" Darth Vader's deep, mechanically tinged voice rumbled, his black mask looking down at Piett. None of the officers had heard or seen his tall, dark form approach.

"Yes, my lord," said Piett, directing Vader's attention to a lower console monitor. The monitor displayed the transmitted image of a snow-base power generator.

“That’s it,” Vader said with conviction. “The Rebels are there.”

Admiral Ozzel saw nothing on the monitor that specifically indicated a Rebel presence, and he did not believe in expending time and energy on a mere hunch. Employing what he considered his most diplomatic manner, Ozzel still sounded condescending when he spoke: “My lord, there are so many uncharted settlements. It could be smugglers, it could be...”

“That is the system,” Vader interrupted. His tone was filled with restrained menace, making it clear that he would not tolerate any questioning of his actions. “Set your course for the Hoth system. General Veers, prepare your men.” Darth Vader turned and stalked off the bridge.

Veers looked at Ozzel, who appeared stung by Vader’s lack of respect for military protocol. Hoping to restore his commanding officer’s confidence, Veers said, “Admiral?”

Ozzel nodded, giving *his* permission for Veers to prepare the soldiers, as if his permission even mattered. Veers walked off quickly, and Ozzel—furious over his treatment by Vader—threw a threatening gaze at Piett before he left in a huff.

If Captain Piett was afraid of Admiral Ozzel, he didn’t show it. In Piett’s experience, it was smarter to be afraid of Darth Vader.

On Hoth, everyone at Echo Base was preparing to evacuate. In the transport bay, several transports were being loaded by soldiers carrying heavy boxes of equipment and supplies. The soldiers moved quickly, but not in panic. Near one transport, two Rebels faced their captain.

“Groups seven and ten will stay behind to fly the speeders,” the captain ordered, prompting one soldier to walk off quickly. Turning to the remaining soldier, the captain said, “As soon as each transport is loaded, evacuation control will give clearance for immediate launch.”

“Right, sir,” answered the soldier.

In the main hangar deck, Han was atop the *Millennium Falcon*, trying frantically to complete the welding on the lifters. In the *Falcon*’s cockpit, Chewbacca sat ready at the controls. After finishing a weld, Han stood up and shouted, “All right, that’s it. Try it...”

Chewbacca threw a switch. Unfortunately, the switch accidentally triggered a minor explosion on the problematic lifter, and nearly launched Han from the *Falcon*’s hull.

“Off!” Han shouted as he leaped away from another small explosion. “Turn it off! Turn it off! Off!”

Chewbacca howled as his furry fingers darted from one switch to the next. When he realized Han had stopped shouting, the Wookiee looked from the cockpit to see if he was all right. At first, all he saw was smoke.

The smoke cleared. Han was unhurt but exasperated as he surveyed the new damage. Sometimes being captain of the fastest ship in the galaxy was not as thrilling as it could be.

In the medical center, Luke got into his bright-orange pressurized g-suit. He was almost ready to leave when 2-1B turned his skull-like metal head in time to see his departing patient. Luke had the impression that 2-1B had genuinely enjoyed hearing about the technical challenges of converting T-47s into snowspeeders, and wasn’t surprised when the droid commented, “Sir, it will take quite a while to evacuate the T-47s.”

“Well, forget the heavy equipment,” Luke said. “There’s plenty of time to get the smaller modules on the transports.” He grabbed his flight gear and headed for the door.

2-1B said, “Take care, sir.”

During his recovery, Luke had gotten to observe the droid well enough to know he meant it. Luke smiled and said, "Thanks."

Leaving the medical center, he proceeded through the laser-cut corridors to the main hangar. Pilots, gunners, and astromech droids scurried about as he walked toward Chewbacca, who was now working under the *Millennium Falcon*.

"Chewie, take care of yourself, okay?" Luke said, and reached up to scratch the Wookiee's neck. Luke turned to walk away, but Chewbacca threw his arms around Luke and gave him a tight hug before letting him go. Luke looked up to find Han standing atop the *Falcon* with a small repair droid.

"Hi, kid," Han said from his elevated position, then turned to the repair droid and scolded, "There's got to be a reason for it. Check it at the other end. Wait a second." While the droid rotated its visual sensors, Han looked back down at Luke and asked, "You all right?"

"Yeah," Luke said. There were so many things he wanted to tell Han. How much their friendship meant, how he hoped Han wasn't hurt by Leia's rejection, how he wished him safety and happiness... but everything he thought of saying somehow sounded like the one thing he didn't want to say: *Goodbye*. So Luke just nodded, then started to walk away.

"Be careful," Han said.

Glancing back, Luke said, "You, too."

In the command center, a Rebel controller urgently gestured for General Rieekan and reported, "General, there's a fleet of Star Destroyers coming out of hyperspace in sector four."

Rieekan leaned over the controller's shoulder to examine the monitor display of sector four, then ordered, "Reroute all power to the energy shield." Turning from the controller, Rieekan faced a Rebel officer and said, "We've got to hold them till all the transports are away. Prepare for ground assault."

While the *Executor* and five Star Destroyers had traveled through hyperspace to arrive in orbit of the ice planet Hoth, Darth Vader had been inside his meditation chamber. A spherical enclosure with a black exterior, the chamber was pressurized to keep Vader comfortable, even with his helmet off.

General Veers entered Vader's private quarters and carefully approached the chamber. Veers stood at attention as jawlike clamps unlocked at the sphere's side, allowing its upper half to rise.

Darth Vader was seated in the center of the chamber's bright white interior. His black helmet was already facing the general, as if he'd been anticipating this meeting.

"What is it, General?" Vader asked.

"My lord, the fleet has moved out of lightspeed," Veers reported. "Comm-scan has detected an energy field protecting an area of the sixth planet of the Hoth system. The field is strong enough to deflect any bombardment."

Vader seethed. "The Rebels are alerted to our presence. Admiral Ozzel came out of lightspeed too close to the system."

Hoping to explain Admiral Ozzel's decision, Veers said, "He felt surprise was wiser...."

"He is as clumsy as he is stupid," Vader interrupted. "General, prepare your troops for a surface attack."

"Yes, my lord," Veers said, then left.

Vader's seat rotated, allowing him to face a wide viewscreen. It flicked on and displayed an image of Admiral Ozzel and Captain Piett on the *Executor*'s bridge. Ozzel turned his face and said, "Lord Vader, the fleet has moved out of lightspeed, and we're preparing to—aaagh!"

On the viewscreen, Ozzel was touching his throat with his left hand. Vader, using the Force, had constricted Ozzel's windpipe.

"You have failed me for the last time, Admiral," Vader said.

Admiral Ozzel took a step backward but remained on the viewscreen.

Vader said, "Captain Piett."

"Yes, my lord," said Piett, tearing his eyes away from the choking admiral to face Vader.

"Make ready to land our troops beyond their energy field and deploy the fleet so that nothing gets off the system." As Admiral Ozzel's strangled form fell to the bridge's deck with an audible thud, Vader added, "You are in command now, *Admiral Piett*."

Piett straightened and said, "Thank you, Lord Vader." He looked to some nearby soldiers and jerked his head slightly, silently instructing them to remove Ozzel's corpse. Piett had always strived to learn from the mistakes of others, but he had not expected a promotion so soon.

There was a sense of urgency at Echo Base. No one knew when the Imperials would strike, but everyone was certain that an attack was inevitable. And because the Rebels' energy shield would protect the base from aerial attack, the Rebels knew the assault would come from the ground.

In the center of the main hangar, Princess Leia and Major Derlin briefed a group of pilots. Leia told them, "All troop carriers will assemble at the north entrance. The heavy transport ships will leave as soon as they're loaded. Only two fighter escorts per ship. The energy shield can only be opened for a short time, so you'll have to stay very close to your transports."

"Two fighters against a Star Destroyer?" said a young pilot who everyone called Hobbie. He sounded more than a little doubtful.

Turning to Hobbie, Leia explained, "The ion cannon will fire several shots to make sure that any enemy ships will be out of your flight path. When you've gotten past the energy shield, proceed directly to the rendezvous point." She gestured to all the pilots. "Understand?"

In unison, the pilots replied in the affirmative. Leia knew, despite any doubts, they would do everything they could to make the plan work. "Good luck," she wished them.

"Okay," said Major Derlin, clapping his gloved hands for attention. "Everybody to your stations. Let's go!" The pilots went to their vehicles, and Leia ran to the command center.

Outside the ice cave, Rebel soldiers carried weapons and positioned them along snow trenches, while others loaded power packs into gun turrets. Near the base power generators, troops rushed to set up their heavy battle equipment. And all around Echo Base, Rebel lookouts trained their eyes and macrobinoculars to the surrounding ice plains, scanning for any sign of the anticipated Imperial troops.

Leia arrived in the command center to find General Rieekan with his eyes glued to the comm-scan display. At their consoles, the Rebel controllers were tense, and everyone was trying hard not to show any fear.

Rieekan said, "Their primary target will be the power generators." He turned to a controller and said, "Prepare to open shield."

The Rebels' protective energy shield was opened, allowing two X-wing starfighters to escort a bulky, 90-meter-long transport up and away from Hoth's surface, leaving Echo Base at least temporarily exposed to the Imperials.

Now all the three Rebel ships had to do was get past the hulking Star Destroyers.

As expected, the two X-wings and the Rebel transport did not go unnoticed as they rose quickly through Hoth's atmosphere. On the bridge of one Imperial Star Destroyer, an Imperial controller approached his captain, who was regarding the ice world through the main viewport.

"Sir," said the controller. "Rebel ships are coming into our sector."

"Good," said the captain. "Our first catch of the day."

Inside the Echo Base command center, a female controller kept her eyes on the comm-scan display, watching the three rising blips that indicated the transport and its two X-wing escorts. On their present course, the vessels were heading almost straight for a Star Destroyer.

"Stand by, ion control," the controller said into a transmitter while she watched the blips. When she knew the Rebel ships were almost within visual range of the destroyer, she gave the command: "Fire!"

Outside the Rebel base, a giant ball-shaped ion cannon made pumping motions as it blasted three consecutive red energy beams skyward. Each energy beam streaked past the escaping Rebel ships and didn't stop until they smashed into the waiting Star Destroyer.

The scarlet bolts took out the destroyer's missile launchers and conning tower, and caused a series of fiery explosions to spread across its metal hull. The destroyer veered, then spun out of control. As the Imperial ship careered into deep space, the Rebel transport and X-wings raced onward to safety.

Back at Echo Station, Rebel pilots, gunners, and ground troops were hurrying to their stations and vehicles when they heard a controller announce over loudspeakers: "The first transport is away." Throughout the base, the Rebels cheered. It was hardly time to celebrate, but the battle had gotten off to a promising start.

In the main hangar, pilots and gunners were scrambling into their snowspeeders, which were lined up in rows with their cockpit canopies raised. When Luke arrived at his speeder, he found his gunner—a fresh-faced, eager kid named Dack Ralter—already in the speeder's aft-facing gunner's seat.

Dack turned his head to see Luke and asked, "Feeling all right, sir?"

"Just like new, Dack," Luke said as he climbed into the pilot's seat. "How about you?"

"Right now I feel like I could take on the whole Empire myself."

Luke grinned. "I know what you mean." He pulled on his helmet as Dack lowered the cockpit canopy. With the canopy in place, Luke glanced through its transparisteel windows to look at the other pilots of Rogue Group, who would be under his command. The pilots included Zev Senesca, who'd been first to locate Han and Luke after their long night out in the snow; Wedge Antilles, who'd also seen combat at the Battle of Yavin; and Hobbie, who'd known Luke's friend Biggs Darklighter.

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