

New Horizons

An Iri Keltesh story by Doran Eirok

February 2017

Hyperspace was beautiful.

It felt like such an overdone and cliched thing to think, but it fit. The blue glow of the hyperspace tunnel surrounded the modest Y-wing starfighter, radiant clouds interweaving in swirling patterns that might have meant something profound to theoretical hyperspace physicists. To Iri Keltesh, nestled in the pilot's seat of that fighter, it was just hypnotically beautiful. Something to gaze into, eyes unfocused, as time and light years passed by.

Iri shifted slightly in the seat to stop parts of his body falling asleep. As a member of a reptilian species known as the Argothae, Iri had had the seat specially modified to accommodate his long, tapered tail; even so, the craft was not exactly a luxury liner and the cockpit did start to feel rather cramped after a couple hours in the black of space, or the blue of faster-than-light travel.

"Ngh.... how much longer, Katie?" His voice sounded hollow in the solitary cockpit, only accompanied by a collection of instruments and controls, and the essential kit stashed behind the seat. All the same, the response came after a couple thoughtful seconds. A series of twitters and bleeps fed through the cabin's speakers. A display screen translated the sounds into Galactic Basic text, but Iri had spent enough time around astromech droids to understand their binary language by ear anymore. This one in particular; R3-422KT, or 'Katie', had first crossed paths with Iri two years previously, and they'd saved each other's lives during the frantic evacuation of Hoth.

Iri smiled at the droid's response. "Yeah I know, just starting to get stiff and stir-crazy up here. Forty minutes isn't too much longer though." He chuckled as the droid responded with an unsympathetic series of blats. "Yes, I know you have even less mobility than I do... and you don't get to move around once we get where we're going. And are working harder than I am to keep the ship steady. Alright alright, sorry I complained! You'll get a victory oil bath when we get home." Katie's irritation trilled off into a hopeful warble. "Yes. A proper service. And at Marko's, not one of those ten-cred street mechanics either."

Iri tried not to laugh aloud at Katie's contented chirps. She'd never let Iri, or anyone else for that matter, get away with taking her for granted. But at least it wasn't too hard to turn her mood around.

It was hard to believe it had only been two years since Hoth. Since then the green Argothae had continued to work with the Rebel Alliance as a hangar bay technician, servicing and maintaining a small corner of the Alliance's starfighter fleet. He'd helped prep the ships for the Battles of Endor and Jakku and numerous smaller, less pivotal ones. He'd come to know the ships and their droids, those that had them, better than the pilots themselves. This particular Y-wing that was now Iri's had pushed itself hard at Endor, dropping some of the proton bombs that helped bring down several Star Destroyers above the forest moon. Despite Iri and Katie's best efforts to keep the old bird sturdy, she'd been grounded after her first sortie over Jakku with a seized injector in the portside engine. Not a hard fix, but with the battle in full swing Iri had been forced to prioritise other fighters, and the bomber's pilot had transferred to a B-wing to continue the fighting. She hadn't come back.

After the battle, Katie and the old Y-wing were both relegated to the back corner of the hangar. Iri and the rest of the

deck crew kept focus on the more modern fighters, particularly those that still had pilots associated with them. Once the small craft were all repaired and serviced and ready for their next fight, the workload became a little more erratic but lighter. Iri found himself fixing the Y-wing's plasma injector in some of his unstructured time, with help and company from the bomber's now-unoccupied droid. Once he finished the injector he found himself two thirds of the way through giving the ship a full servicing when the announcement came down that the Galactic Concordance had been signed. The Empire was no more, its forces were disarming, and the Rebellion was becoming the New Republic. They'd won.

The galaxy would be in turmoil for years to come, of course. There was now a massive power vacuum left behind by the Empire, and it would take the Republic a lot of time and resource to fill it and stabilise things. Not all of the Imperial forces had come quietly, either; remnant factions had jumped with uncertain military strength into the distant Unknown Regions of the galaxy. Not that the Republic would forget about them, but it was going to be pulled in a lot of different directions.

Iri, like most everyone who had fought with the Rebellion, had a particular stake in one of those directions. So it was later that week, as the celebrations began to calm and everyone was trying to assess the question of 'what now?' that Iri found himself sitting across a desk from his cruiser's first officer.

"Thank you for seeing me, Commander."

"Of course. It's a big ship and everything's pretty crazy right now, but I always try to make time for the crew. Ah... you'll have to forgive me though, please remind me of your name?"

"First Technician Iri Keltesh, Sir. I'm with the One-Forty-Seventh deck crew, lately stationed here on the Kenobi out of hangar two."

"Ahh, right right. Apologies, I don't get down to the hangar decks much. What can I do for you, Iri?"

"Well Sir... I'm from a world called Rillyn. It's part of the Colony Regions, but a bit off the beaten track, not immediately on any major trade routes and not particularly strategic or well-known. Our people traded a little with neighbouring systems but mostly just lived off the land and stayed out of galactic politics and the like. When I was eight years old the Empire occupied our world. Set up a series of mining operations, forcibly relocated most of us out of our villages where we were in the way, and established a garrison. There wasn't really a fight, of course... my people were peaceful and the Empire, even only having a single Destroyer in orbit, had overwhelming power compared to anything we could muster. So we mostly tried to stay peaceful and cooperative, reasoning that they'd take what they wanted and eventually be on their way, and we'd at least still be alive so we could then work to pick up the pieces and rebuild our culture. I later found out that they've mostly been after an ore called Dolovite... it isn't even particularly rare or valuable, but from what I gather it was important to the Death Stars and Rillyn has a number of very rich deposits, so it was a cost-effective operation for the Empire. Especially with us not really putting up much of a fight."

The Commander nodded softly. "It's an all-too familiar story. The kind of which brought a lot of us to the Rebellion. I don't want to belittle the importance of this to you, but I have a lot of commitments awaiting my attention, so if you could cut to the chase pretty soon it'd be helpful."

"Of course Sir. I joined the Alliance through a smuggler network that had a presence in the Imperial supply lines for their garrison on Rilyyn, shortly after the Battle of Yavin. When I left my parents were still alive, and as far as I was last aware they still are, but most of my people had been forcibly reduced to living in terrible conditions. Scrounging for supplies, growing only barely enough food to get by on land contaminated with industrial tailings, hardly any medical supplies available at all. And regularly oppressed by bored Imperial troops. Now, with the Empire fallen... their garrison has never been very large, from what reports I've been able to dig up in my spare time. A few trooper divisions, some light armour, only a token few fighters to provide air support. And being such an insignificant Imperial holding, they'll be cut off from any supplies. Whatever remnant is left of the Empire won't be bothering with them. They're alone, they're cut off from support and supply, and they'll be weary and demoralised having heard that their Empire is no more."

"I think I can see where you're going with this, Iri..."

"Sir, I know that with our victory over the Empire you must be getting stories and requests like this from half the crew, and believe me, I appreciate that the Republic is going to be stretched incredibly thin for years to come. I know that Rilyyn doesn't have the strategic importance of major core worlds or population centres or industrial stations, and I know the Republic can't fly around the galaxy liberating every single world immediately. But with the state Rilyyn is in, it really wouldn't take much. A single frigate, a modest fighter escort and a couple detachments of troops and weapon crates would probably be enough to break the garrison within a day, and then those resources would be freed up again for the Republic to use as needed. And... Sir, my people would be free. Please, Commander, I will beg if I have to, but please consider this, or

raise it with the Captain. I just... I know there are more strategic or heavily populated planets, I know plenty of worlds have suffered far worse than mine, but... this is what I joined up for, Commander. So I have to ask."

The Commander leaned back in his chair and sighed, rubbing his brow. With the victory celebrations starting to wane, his visible weariness reflected that felt all across the fleet. The war had been long and everyone had lost too much. "Iri... I understand you completely. And I hope you'll understand me too when I tell you, reluctantly, that I really can't promise anything. I will ask, you have my word on that. Rillyn will go on record as a world in need of liberation, but it's as you say. The Republic is just getting started, and far from a galactic navy, we only have the tired, broken remains of a Rebellion to try and reclaim and police the galaxy with. It's not enough, frankly. We'll do what we can and what we must, but I fear that Rillyn is one of a lot of worlds that's going to have to wait a while longer. It isn't fair and it isn't right, but it is what it is."

Iri stared down at the desk. He knew this would be the answer. He understood it, and he couldn't be angry at the Commander over it. Much as he wanted to. And even having known it would go this way, and having thought he was prepared for it, he still felt the tears welling up and burning in his eyes. "It would take so little..."

"You think it would. Forgive my bluntness, Iri, but you're a technician. Not a commando, not a combat strategist. And I've learned over the years that battles never go as simply as you expect, even when you're sure all the numbers line up. You think it would be quick and easy, and we could go in and liberate your world with minimal effort and loss of life. Maybe we could. Or maybe that remnant garrison is sitting on resources you don't know about, maybe there are characteristics of the battlefield

that would affect the outcome in unpredictable ways, maybe your own people have lived under Imperial control for long enough that their fighting spirit isn't what you think it is. Any number of possibilities exist, which is why planning an operation isn't just a simple task of sending in a ship and a few fighters and assuming it'll all go to plan. There's scouting and intelligence gathering, mapping, planning, drawing up strategies and counter-strategies... all of which makes it a considerable investment of time and resource on the part of the Republic. And one they can't afford to not be very selective with at this stage." The Commander sighed, and to his credit he did look truly sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Iri. I truly am. And as I said, I will ask. But I will caution you not to hope for much."

Iri nodded softly, rising to his feet. "Someone once told me that this entire Rebellion was built on hope." The Commander gave a barely perceptible wince, and Iri sighed, rubbing at his eyes briefly. "I get it, Commander. I do. I understand. It's just... I know the galaxy's a better place now, and we've done a great thing by toppling the Empire... but that can all feel pretty distant and hollow when the reason you're fighting, on a really personal level I mean, is still right there, no better than before."

The Commander didn't have anything to say to that. He just kept looking sympathetic and slightly pained.

Iri shook his head a little, pulling himself together and then saluting. "Thank you for hearing me out, Sir."

"Of course, Iri. Look after yourself."

The Argothae nodded, then turned and left the room.

Hyperspace continued to swirl past outside the cockpit windows. Katie broke the silence with an inquisitive trill.

"Mmm... yeah, just lost in old thoughts. Ten minutes? Good. Nearly there. Everything going smoothly back there?"

Katie's affirmative warble reassured him this was the case. Iri pulled his flight helmet out from its cradle behind his seat and nestled it onto his head. His black and blue flight gear, like his seat, had also required some custom work to cooperate with his tail, the shape of his digitigrade legs and feet, and his long ears and muzzle. Bits of it had come from a damaged Alliance flight suit, while other parts had, oddly, been scavenged and appropriated from captured TIE pilot gear. Just one more case of working with what was available. Once they docked he'd add a faceplate to his helmet and seal everything up as a precaution, but while the mission involved some zero gee work there shouldn't actually be any vacuum operations to contend with. Still, better safe than sorry.

The FTL tunnel was doing a good job today of making Iri's mind wander, it seemed. The conversation with his old Commander was still fresh in his mind, and reflecting on the custom nature of his flight suit brought up some of the better memories of the days that had followed.

Iri had kept trying to be angry at the Commander, but he just hadn't been able. He did understand the wider situation, even if he hated it, and a couple days later he received a personal message that the Executive Officer had indeed brought up the subject of Rillyn's liberation with his Captain. The answer had been the expected one, but Iri did find himself grateful that the Commander had been true to his word.

All the same, it all had started Iri thinking that maybe he and the Rebellion no longer needed each other as much as they once had. It was a Republic now, and while there would still be a lot of work to do, the life of a Republic Navy technician somehow didn't hold the same appeal that the life of a Rebel technician had. It wasn't really anger at the refusal to liberate his homeworld, so much as a more general realisation that the Republic was transitioning away from something Iri felt as desperate a need to be a part of as he once had.

Equal to any of that, Iri just didn't want to fight anymore. The war was over. So many had died, including, it seemed, most of the pilots he'd tried to befriend over the years. Life on a deck crew was safer than a lot of positions had been, but even so death had felt a regular and close companion to his life for too long now. So he started talking to his Deck Officer about resigning, leaving the Republic to strike off on his own. Iri had plenty of technical skill from his work in the hangars, and he'd dabbled enough in various other roles throughout the fleet that he was confident he could make a pretty capable life for himself as a freelancer specialising in scouting, communications and information retrieval. All he'd really need would be a ship. And that got him thinking again about the battered old Y-wing and its droid in the back corner of the maintenance bay.

He'd gotten to know its workings pretty well over the past couple weeks with his adopted personal project of repairing and servicing the ship for no real reason, and the droid, Katie, had become a remarkably entertaining friend. He'd worked with her off and on for the last couple years, but it had been especially over the past week that he'd found himself bonding with her, working well with her, laughing at her statements. It felt a bit weird to be able to say with such certainty that a droid was his friend, but it was a common enough thing for technicians and

pilots who spent so much of their time working with them. And, Iri reflected, in a world where life had come to seem so ephemeral and uncertain, a droid somehow managed to feel an oddly stable and reliable source of friendship for a harried hangar technician.

He brought up the question over lunch with Lt. Harley Shaan, his Deck Officer. Iri determined rather quickly that there wasn't a particularly casual way to ask a question like, "so do you have any plans for that old Y-wing in the corner?" so he pretty much just blurted it out in those words. If he'd timed it ever so slightly better he probably could've gotten Harley to exhale his coffee all over the table, but the opportunity was missed. Barely.

"That old bird? I'm inclined to say she's flown her last and will probably be decommissioned and scrapped for parts... There could be more life in there, but when you put it in terms of cost/benefit to the Republic, it's going to make more sense to put the effort into newer ships that'll have lower upkeep costs. B-wings have mostly replaced the old Y's for duty against capital ships anyway." The lieutenant narrowed his eyes slightly, peering over the table at Iri. "...But I get the sense you're about to ask me for a favour. You've been spending time around that old thing in your off hours, haven't you?"

Iri chuckled and nodded. "I only meant to sort out that plasma injector that grounded her during Jakku. And then I just kind of... kept going. Hate leaving a job unfinished. And the droid that's been assigned to it has been helping out, I think she's bored too, and has actually become kind of a downright friend."

Harley laughed. "'She,' hmm? Damn, you're already in too deep for me to save you. Honestly that R3 is pretty old too, maybe not quite as worn down as the ship itself but close to it. Probably due to be recycled as well, if not wiped and given a major overhaul. Look, let me try to save you a bunch more awkward beating around the bush. You're looking to resign,

we've been through that already and I wish you the best... nothing wrong with that, you're hardly the only one looking at a career change now. The Republic owes you some severance pay, but isn't exactly rolling in spare credits right now... so I think there could in fact be an opportunity here. We can negotiate the details of course, but if you'd be willing to deduct from your severance pay something like the equivalent scrap value of the ship and the droid, maybe a little extra to help grease the wheels with the higher-ups or something... from my perspective it should be very possible to send you away with a bit less cash but that old ship and droid. If that's really what you want, anyway. Are you sure you can get her to fly again?"

Iri raised an eyeridge. "I'm near sure I already have. I mean, I haven't had her actually up in the air but I've gone over all the key systems top to bottom and all the diagnostics check out. I think she's ready to fly, pending a fuel-up."

"Kriffing stars Iri, you've been busier than I thought. What about the droid?"

"Katie's due a full servicing as well, but I thought that might be pushing things a bit too far without authorisation so I've held off."

"Hah. Well I appreciate your restraint. As I said though, she'd probably be destined for scrap too by this point, so go for it."

"Thanks Harley. I think this could really be what I need right now."

"Don't thank me until I check with Command and make sure they don't mind letting go of the old bird. But I don't see why they'd object. You've been great to have on the crew but it's plain to see you've had about enough of this life, and if I can help set you up for another one I want to. Owe you that much."

"Thanks all the same. I really appreciate it."

Sure enough things came together. Iri and Katie had already sorted out the mechanicals, so all that was left was some touching up of the hull and a new coat of paint. Harley was happy enough to facilitate that out of the hangar supplies, along with a new matching paint job for Katie, whose outer shell was similarly showing its age. With neither slated for further military service a wider variety of choice was available, and Iri ultimately settled on a livery of dark blue and vibrant green. It made both ship and droid rather eye-catching, and Katie seemed particularly pleased with her new look. He named it '*Rillyn's Hope*' out of a promise to himself to find some way to help his homeworld. He wasn't sure how he'd be able to do anything on the sort of pay he expected, but he'd keep his eyes open along the way.

The deck crew threw a small party for Iri as he left, sad to see him go but wishing him well. He was sad to be leaving them behind too, having worked so closely and well with a number of them over the past year or two, but this was what he needed. They waved as he piloted the old Y-wing out of the hangar, Katie helping him calculate a hyperspace jump.

In actuality it wasn't a dramatic and final break with the New Republic, never to be seen again; he was a freelancer now, but his first several contracts were with the Republic. His goals still aligned with theirs and he wasn't short of contacts, but as an independent agent he could run solo missions that might be awkward or not cost-effective for the Republic to devote its own resources to in a more direct fashion. So having chatted again with his former Commander, a need was identified for which an

independent scout in a small fighter proved ideal. It went smoothly, as did the next couple after that, such that by the time his current mission had rolled around, Iri was getting pretty confident in his new profession and carving out a respectable reputation for himself when it came to the scouting of remote facilities, personal information retrieval, or light investigative work. After his second mission he put some of his savings into a substantial modification of his Y-wing to tailor it to the sorts of missions he was running. Out went the old bomb bay and storage, as he wasn't likely to be needing that ever again. He replaced it with a small cargo module to give himself more space to play with, an upgraded memory core, and atop the main fuselage he fitted an aftermarket sensor and communications package. *Rillyn's Hope* ceased to be a bomber and became a light and fast single-occupant scout ship. The dish and antenna cluster now protruding out the top of the fighter didn't look especially stylish, but Iri felt sure the setup would help his work considerably.

By the end of his third mission it became apparent to Iri that living out of a single-seat starfighter and short-stay rentals was neither comfortable nor financially sensible. After some research, Iri signed a rental agreement on a tiny but serviceable apartment in the port district of Rezzek City on the mid-rim world of Tibro. It was far from luxurious, but it had a bed, a sanistream shower, a cookslot and a power hookup for Katie. After a series of long hauls in the *Hope*, having somewhere to come home to with even those simple amenities felt like the height of decadence. Iri had since found a number of local establishments that were good places to do business or relax as well, so all in all it made for a quite favourable setup.

This was mission six now. He imagined he'd stop counting at some point, but Iri was early enough in this new

career of his that he still celebrated and was heartened by every positive result and smooth operation. He hoped that mission six would continue this trend.

A soft warble from Katie told him it was time to get to work. "Right, coming up on our destination... here we go." Iri throttled back on the hyperdrive controls, authorising and beginning the deceleration sequence that Katie then took up to handle the precise calculations and timings. The swirling blue of the hyperspace tunnel resolved into the linear streaks of passing stars, which then compressed into single points of light against the relative darkness as the *Hope* settled back into normal space. Iri glanced over the scopes and nav readings to check their position, then nodded. "There's our target. Fifty clicks out. Looks like the location data was correct anyway. Ready to see if the access codes are too?"

Katie chirped in the affirmative and began to power up the comms array. The target was a dark metallic cylinder adrift in space, assembled of several modular components and bristling with communications dishes and antennae. It was an old Imperial comms relay, presumably neglected since the Empire's defeat. The Republic had recovered data on a number of such assets from captured Star Destroyers and databases after the surrender, and some of the particularly remote ones made good targets for solitary scouts like Iri to investigate. The Imperials had obviously sought to wipe as much sensitive data as they could when their forces were captured, but they never had time to clear out absolutely everything, and basic galactic infrastructure like this comms relay were pretty far down the list of priorities. All the same, any data being currently transmitted or stored in the onboard buffers could provide valuable intel for the Republic, particularly in its efforts to keep track of what any rogue Imperial forces might still be getting up to.

Behind Iri, the droid warbled her readiness. Iri glanced over his shoulder and saw the ship's comms array lit up with various status indicator lights. "Alright. Let's see how convincing an impression we can do of an Imperial service craft. Transmit."

Along with the captured data on the Empire's deep space communications network, the Republic had found and provided Iri with some access codes. Normally, the codes would be transmitted by an authorised service craft as it approached to dock with the relay station to perform any necessary maintenance tasks. In exchange, the relay's autodefense turrets would refrain from blasting it out of the sky.

Iri's Y-wing, needless to say, was not an authorised Imperial service craft. But if the code checked out, the station would be convinced it was and its defenses would stay nicely quiet. The Argothae waited with his hands nervously on the controls after Katie signaled that the codes had been sent, and the station's computer was deciding their fate. After what felt like unreasonable minutes of processing time, the response data came back from the station and flowed across the main cockpit screen, and Katie gave a happy trill of relief. Iri let out his breath and smiled. "Brilliant. The station thinks we're Imps. Let's get this done."

He gave the engines a nudge, accelerating the ship toward the waiting station. A red glow reflected dully off the metallic surfaces of the structure, sent from a distant red giant star. Apart from the relay station, a sparse asteroid belt was the only additional feature in this otherwise unremarkable system in what felt like the middle of nowhere. A sensible place to anchor a comms relay you don't want found or tampered with, really. As they closed the distance Iri eased the ship into a slow roll to the left, bringing it into alignment with the station. He headed toward the bottom of the station where a narrow docking port extended

below the communications equipment, just enough to allow one small ship to dock when maintenance was needed. Iri noted the protrusions of a few small blaster turrets as well; currently silent and not massively powerful, but enough to easily shred his small fighter if they changed their minds while his shields were down. He hoped they decided to stay friendly. As they drew close Katie took over the fine controls, managing the maneuvering jets to ease the Y-wing's cockpit into the docking collar. Magnetic clamps latched onto the hull all around Iri as the flexible collar matched the contours of the ship, and the view out the cockpit windows became strangely claustrophobic as open space was replaced by Imperial durasteel. Katie twittered away as she began to link up the ship's systems with the station's computer, maintaining the digital ruse that it was just another normal Imperial service craft and beginning to pressurise the airlock for Iri. The Argothae meanwhile engaged the seals on his flight suit and fitted a faceplate over his muzzle. It wasn't a dedicated space suit and wouldn't keep him alive for very long in a full vacuum, but it offered a reassuring layer of protection if something should go wrong. In space, one did not do well to take unnecessary risks.

As Iri was clicking the last of his helmet seals into place, a trill from Katie accompanied green lights on his console and the docking port overhead, indicating that the airlock was ready and the atmospheres equalised between it and his cockpit. With a final breath Iri undid the latches on his canopy and pushed the hinged cockpit opening upward. Despite the airlock's best efforts there was still a brief gust of wind as the atmospheres exchanged with one another, but a quick check of his suit's readouts confirmed the presence of a reasonably safe environment.

Iri stood up as the round outer door of the airlock opened for him, grabbing a datapad and a small pouch of cables and adapters from behind the pilot seat. Pocketing both, he gave a gentle kick off from the pilot's seat to start him floating upward into the narrow airlock. A relay station like this wasn't generally manned so there was no point in fitting it with an artificial gravity system. The Argothae gave a soft grunt as the top of his helmet bumped against the inner door, steadying himself and activating the control panel to cycle the lock. Below him, the outer door closed as Katie shut and latched the *Hope's* canopy. After a moment the inner door opened, and Iri gazed upward into the access shaft of the comms relay station.

It consisted of little more than a tube wide enough for a single person, running up the length of the small station with access hatches opening onto various systems. There really wasn't anything else to it. It was cramped and dimly lit and windowless, and in keeping with Imperial design language virtually every surface was silver, dark grey or black. Iri found himself feeling a mild pang of sympathy for whatever Imperial technicians had been required to spend their days maintaining these structures; for a quick slicing mission it wouldn't be too bad, but working in access tubes like this day after day would get uncomfortable in a hurry.

In the microgravity, a quick tap of Iri's boots against the outer airlock door was all it took to start him floating along the shaft, guiding his progress periodically with the handholds until he came to one of the larger access panels halfway up the spine of the structure. "Here we are. Main computer core. You all wired in, Katie?"

An affirmative warble came over the radio in Iri's helmet as he set to work sliding the panel open, then retrieving his datapad and the appropriate cables to plug it into the Imperial

computer. "Excellent. Once I'm wired in we should be able to link up and hit this together."

Selecting the correct cables and adapters, and getting them all plugged in where they needed to go, wasn't the most straightforward job when working through thick leathery gloves, but being designed for piloting they didn't impede his dexterity too badly. Within a couple minutes Iri had his datapad plugged directly into the station's computer core. Text began to fill the device's screen as the data connection was established, helped along by Katie who was able to sync up with the pad through their shared connection to the station's computer.

"Right, first things first. We need to access the buffer and see how much information is there. Can you find the core address?"

The pair worked together for the best part of an hour. Katie deciphered the Imperial computer language for Iri, translating it to an intelligible interface on his datapad that he could use to navigate the system. The relay's buffer happily contained a sizeable supply of Imperial interstellar communications; both as a log of recent messages that may have been sent but would remain stored until the next reset, as well as an unusually large backlog of messages that it hadn't yet been able to send on in all the chaos of the Empire's fall. They downloaded the entire archive to the Hope's memory core. Many of the messages would probably be inane and uninteresting, but that would be for the Republic technicians to sort through. Could be there was some sensitive information there too that would help the Navy track down some of the remaining Imperial forces or get a better sense of what they were up to and what their strength was. Either way, Iri would get paid for bringing it in.

The second part of the job was slightly more nuanced, and involved a bit more active slicing into the system. With

Katie's help he located the sections of code devoted to the targeting of the station's comms equipment, and implemented a number of changes. After running a few diagnostics to ensure everything had been completed correctly, he smiled to himself and leaned back in the microgravity. From then on, any future Imperial communications the station might receive would be forwarded on not only to the original Imperial destination to avoid suspicion, but also copied to a Republic-controlled receiver. With the Empire in decline there might not be much, but if the remnant forces were still using their old comms network it could allow the Republic to listen it.

"I think we're done here. Everything look good to you?" At Katie's affirmative chirp Iri logged his datapad out of the system, then unplugged and stowed the cables. He then span himself around lazily and pushed back toward the airlock. He felt lighthearted and relieved as the airlock cycled and admitted him back into his Y-wing, satisfied that another job had gone smoothly. It wasn't particularly exciting work by any means, but it helped the Republic and it paid pretty well. And it was something he was proving pretty good at.

Iri settled himself in the pilot's seat and harnessed himself in after closing the canopy, powering up the engines. "Everything look good to you, Katie? Done and clear to depart?" The droid, sharing Iri's cautious nature, took a moment process and double-check the comms with the station before twittering a reassurance. Iri nodded; everything appeared in order.

As such, it caught Iri rather off-guard when he detached the ship from the station's airlock and was suddenly met by blaring alarms and flashing red lights from the station above. For a moment he just blinked, frozen in shock and having no idea what had just happened. "Wh... Katie, what the...?" The droid then filled the cockpit with a stream of panicked bleeping and

twittering. Iri's eyes widened, and his green hide paled slightly under his helmet. "The station needed a separate authorisation code to *leave*???" Thinking fast, Iri powered up the *Hope's* shields and glanced upward at the station. Red warning lights were blinking all over its surface. Worse, several small blaster turrets were rotating to face him. "Why wasn't that in the kriffing intel?!? Hang on!"

Iri wrapped a gloved hand around the flight control stick and hauled back on it as hard as he could. Thrusters fired from below the ship's 'chin' and the top rear of the engine nacelles, shoving it into a hard upward pitch. Iri clenched his teeth as the G-forces slammed him down into the seat, clenching his muscles to avoid blacking out from the pressure. Once the ship was aimed away from the station, he released the stick and punched the throttle control forward to maximum. He grunted and remained clenched as he was now squashed into the back of the seat, the engines roaring to full burn and accelerating the fighter into space.

Several sharp jolts and the blaring of a new alarm informed Iri that they were taking fire. He cycled the fighter's shields to double rear and took hold of the stick again, beginning to weave and roll to try and evade the bolts of deadly green light being hurled his way by the now-angry station. "Katie! See if you can run some interference with our ion turret. And calculate a jump to lightspeed!" He heard the servos whirring behind his head as the ion turret atop the cockpit swung around, then the thuds of energy as it returned fire. If the shots hit they wouldn't do much damage to those guns, but they might disable a few long enough to give them some breathing room. Katie then answered with an ascending tweet of query. "Anywhere! Just get us out of here! Doesn't have to be far." Another shudder rocked the ship, punctuating the urgency of the situation. Iri kept

balancing evasion and speed as best he could, but the shields were down to 15% even with all their power focused on defending the rear. "Come on Katie, just a little hop is all we need..." He glanced at his rear view monitor and wished he hadn't; a barrage of green light was speeding toward them. The station must have coordinated all its turrets at once for a wide barrage to try and score a hit. "But we need it *now*..."

Iri sent the ship into a fast, diving roll to try and get them out of the line of fire, but the salvo was coming in fast and over a wide enough arc he wasn't sure he could cover enough lateral distance in time. The engines were already at maximum and he was on the diagonal from the direction of fire, but it was going to be close. He clenched his teeth and braced for the impact as green light seemed to fill the cockpit through the rear window from the approaching fire... and then abruptly it shifted to the silvery-blue light of outstretched stars and hyperspace distortion as Katie vaulted the ship away to safety.

The jump only lasted a couple seconds, depositing them out at the edge of the system. Space was once again black, and the red giant star at the system's centre was now a distant red dot, the comms relay itself too far and tiny to be visible. Iri blinked and panted, leaning back in his seat and slowly letting the tension drain from him. After a few deep breaths he raised his hands to unfasten the faceplate from his helmet. "Katie... we all okay? Any damage?"

The astromech ran a quick diagnostic, then twittered back to report nothing worse than some carbon scoring across the engine nacelles and the comms unit on the rear deck. The shields had done their job.

"Phew... well that was fun. Good work on the jump, thanks for that. Right then, let's get setting up a more relaxed jump, shall we? We'll deliver this data and then head home. I

think we've earned a little break." Katie bweeped cheerfully in response, beginning a new set of calculations, and then chirped a question. Iri grinned widely, closing his eyes. "Absolutely. You're definitely getting the full service package, with a wash and polish and everything." The droid gave a warble of delight, sounding utterly pleased with herself as she finished plotting their next jump and sent *Rillyn's Hope* once more into the blue glow of hyperspace.