**Boarding the Zephyr**
by Calindra Hejaran, Jedi Hunter, 14234

*'Spectacular achievement is always preceded by unspectacular preparation,’* her father was fond of saying. That expression had followed her throughout her entire life, and she had always approached everything with careful preparation. Even if patrolling the edges of Sith space wasn't exactly what Calindra had in mind for her knight trial, that's what had been assigned to her, and she had set out to do her best to see it carried out. Unfortunately, Lord Victae di Plagia hadn't given her any specific instructions or mission parameters, just a *'do or do not'* spiel that basically amounted to her life being extinguished if she failed to deliver satisfactory results. The desired results, however, were a bit hazy seeing as they hadn't been given to her. She had to assume that her decisions would be subject to scrutiny and bear testimony to her success or undoing.

With that in mind she had ordered Lieutenant Sigmundus to round up a small boarding party for an excursion on the edge of Sith space as soon as she'd gotten out of the Headmaster's sanctum. The only thing she had insisted on before leaving was that he find at least one member of the medical corp to accompany them, and not just a simple medic.

Once the small team had finally made their way to hyperspace, Calindra managed to sit down to study the document the Headmaster had given her one last time. She considered the map, and then sent a small jolt of energy coursing through its fine fibers. The parchment quickly caught fire and burned into cinders, much to the shuttle's scrubber droid's displeasure. She considered asking Sigmundus for more paper just to hear the frustrated litany of bips and chirps again.

"Ah heck with it," she said as she purposely scuffed the deck with her black boots, leaving a good scuff mark in the process, to which was an immediate chirp of indignation and disbelief. She grinned as the droid’s admonishments started anew while it went to work on the scuff mark marring the beautifully polished deck. The droid complained the whole time as it toiled away.

"Why do you insist on antagonizing the poor thing?" asked a familiar voice behind her.

"You know, I typically don't like droids, but in this case I find this one funny. Have we arrived at the coordinates, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, my lord. There seems to be a derelict Corellian Corvette just on the outskirts of Sith space at 271,312," the Lieutenant reported. "So far, there is no response to our hails."

"Life signs?"

"Inconclusive at this point, my lord, but we're moving in for a closer look. In case you're interested, its markings name it the Zephyr. We're cross-referencing the name and model in our databases; nothing so far."

Calindra pursed her lips, deep in thought. Something was tugging at her. *'Is it that disturbance in the Force Lord Victae di Plagia had hinted at..?'* she wondered.

"Has anyone calculated its course and speed, if any?" she asked as she suddenly got up from her seat.

"It is adrift, that much we've concluded..." he said as he followed her to the piloting cabin where the pilot and systems officer were busy getting as much telemetry data as possible.

"The derelict ship's course and speed," she requested again as she stood behind the systems officer.

"It's coming up now, m'am," he said as he nodded towards the screen. "It's on a direct course for Sith space, going at a crawl of 458 kilometers per hour. It should reach the Dromund system in... 75 years, 7 months, and 3 days."

"— so we've got enough information to figure out its likely point of origin too," Calindra stated as she looked over the man's shoulder.

"Well... Yes, if we consider the course and speed on the same axis, then the nearest system from where it could have originated from would be Yavin, roughly 40 years ago."

Calindra's eyes narrowed, "Is that so...?" The systems officer was saying something, but Calindra was deep in thought and didn't like all these coincidences.

"Lieutenant," she said suddenly, "prepare the boarding team. Make sure the medical officer comes along."

Thirty minutes later, Calindra was aboard the Zephyr with six well seasoned Stormtroopers, and the appointed medical officer, leaving Sigmundus in charge of the ship with the pilot and system's officer. They had managed to enter the vessel through one of the breached cargo holds whose content had long dispersed into the vastness of space.

With the Zephyr’s environmental controls offline, the ship was dark, the atmosphere within would be practically inexistent, and the grav plates were inactive. Forced to activate their zero-G gear's grav boots, the troopers scanned the cargo hold they'd entered, lighting it up with the lights on their rifles before clanking towards the hold's only exit while Calindra and the medical officer — a certain Zala Qal'fari — let the team work on the door's controls.

"— life signs, you say?" the other woman repeated, a bit of frustration tainting her words. There was another sputter of static from Sigmundus that was barely intelligible. "Something's causing a lot of interference for an old abandoned ship..." Qal'fari complained.

"Don't worry if you didn't get that," Calindra answered, "it's probably due to the ship's haul and rotation. As to the life signs, I can feel them. Though..." Calindra couldn't quite put her finger on whatever *'they'* were. "They seem to be sleeping, or unaware."

There was a sudden clank as the empty cargo hold's main hatch was breached just a small fraction of the way. There was a small gust of air that sent ice crystals flying in every direction, but not much else. The idea was to use the hold's access corridor as a sort of buffer between the hold and the rest of the ship's atmosphere should there be any.

With the air pressure vented harmlessly into space, the four of the troopers immediate pointed their rifles towards the hatch's opening, while the other two worked the controls manually to get the opening large enough to let everyone through. The *all clear* was quick to follow, and the exercise was repeated one last time at the other end of the corridor once the hatch was sealed behind them to maintain whatever haul integrity the ship had left.

Calindra wasn't sure if she wanted to retrieve the ship or if she should have it destroyed, but she figured if it wasn't in too bad of a shape, it might be of use in the Imperial Navy. Even if it was only good for scraps, it might still have some useful cargo... There were also those life signs and that odd disturbance in the Force that kept nagging her.

"M'am, please stand aside," the sergeant told the medical officer as he motioned for her to step towards the walls. Calindra waved her over; herself, backed against the bulkhead and ready for the re-pressurization once they opened that final blast door. As soon as the doctor was out of harm’s way, the other door was opened with a large clank and a whoosh of air tugged at them as it raced into the corridor to fill the void in the hall.

The door they had unsealed gave way to more darkness, which they pushed back with the lights of the Stormtroopers' rifles again. There was floating debris all over, blaster charred bulkheads, destroyed computer terminals, and the sinister forms of frozen bodies floating in the darkness.

"Looks like they went down fighting," someone remarked.

With the equalization of the air, however, a lot of the loose objects had been sucked towards the entrance and was heading straight towards them. "Watch yourselves," Calindra warned as she took the lead and pushed outwards in front of her with the Force, forcing the various objects and bodies out of her team's way. "It looks like we've disturbed a tomb, but we did expect this given the battle that took place at Yavin. I'm just surprised that..."

"— this one was eaten..." Zala interrupted.

"Eaten?" everyone voiced in disbelief.

"Sergeant, have your men watch the darkness as we examine the body, please," Calindra ordered as she moved up to the medical officer's side.

"— see here," Zala said as Calindra bent down to take a closer look at the Rebel Alliance officer whose features had been frozen into a perpetual scream of terror and pain. His blood stained hands were crisped in their final agonizing death throws, and his chest had been torn open. They could clearly see his exposed rib cage, but the doctor was shining the light on one area in particular. "This rib shows signs of teeth marks... see here,” she explained, pointing to small grooves the teeth had left behind in the bone. “He was trying to fend off whatever it was as that did this to him," she added as she pointed at the blood on his hands.

"Looks unpleasant," Calindra shuddered, happy to have a medical expert with her. "Let's head in deeper. Keep your eyes peeled for something that could eat a man alive."

She felt Zala's curiosity radiate from her and the troopers' grim determination. Calindra was pleased to see that it would take more than a few bodies and a potential man-eating critter to faze them.

"This way," she said, as she propelled herself with the Force into the darkness ahead. She could feel the life signs; closer now.

The damage to the ship was more extensive the deeper they ventured. Where they had seen blaster marks before where the crew had mustered a sort of resistance, but this eventually gave way to blaster marks and blood smears across the decks and bulkheads, body parts instead of bodies. One of the troopers swatted a frozen hand floating towards him. "I take it back," he said, "they went down fighting each other..."

"What do you mean?" Calindra said slowing down.

"Well, there are no enemy bodies here; everyone is in Rebel gear."

"He's right," Zala chimed in, "but if you look at the bodies, the ones with the blaster marks, they are showing some signs of mutation.

"— mutation?" Calindra's eyebrow shot up in surprise.

"Yes, see here? This one's got bloody teeth, its face’s bone structure is wrong. It was human, but it clearly isn't right... But more importantly look at its hands."

"— they're claws, not hands!"

"Precisely, this one was gunned down while it was attacking its comrades. And several others were sliced cleanly, with a lightsaber perhaps?"

"Do you have a theory as to what could do this? The mutation, I mean?"

"I'd have to put the entire ship under quarantine in order to investigate, but I'd say a virus or something similar. I'd need samples and perform autopsies to be sure."

Calindra's mind was racing with all sorts of questions, and she didn't like any of the conclusions she was reaching. On the one hand she saw the opportunity for research interesting, but whatever could mutate members of the crew to attack their own men and feed off of them had to be seriously dark and twisted. Whatever had done this was now likely frozen like the rest of the bodies on the Zephyr, but fact remained that there were several life signs that she could still feel deeper in the darkness.

Added to the fact that the ship was floating towards Sith space (even at a crawl) she could only imagine what scenario could play out if the ship crashed on one of the imperial controlled planets. At this point, she had to assume this had been done deliberately. There were too many coincidences to base this on sheer luck and happenstance. One theory was that the ship was incapacitated by a biological agent. Perhaps the Empire had tested out some other weapon against the rebels, but that didn't explain the precision with which the ship's course had been set for the Sith worlds.

It was almost as if someone had deliberately tried to lay all of this at their feet in a final gamble or parting shot: *'See what you've done? Have fun dealing with your own creations.'*

"Did any of the escape pods make it off this ship?" she suddenly asked out loud.

"No m'am," our scans had revealed that all the pods were accounted for.

Calindra stretched out her mind into the darkness beyond. They were closer now. "Alright then, let's see if we can find out how anything could have survived this long after everything that's happened here."

With her mind firmly locked on the cluster of *'survivors'*, she led the team deeper into the ship towards what appeared to be an engineering section, which to their surprise, was aglow with several active computer system.

"Sergeant, what are those terminals for?"

"They look like they are part of the engineering section's escape pod and engine controls"

"You mean, someone rigged this section's pods?"

"By the look of it, they seem to be on a timer of sorts..." the Sergeant replied. "No wait! The pods are linked to an atmospheric trigger; the timer is set to engage the ship's engines."

Calindra approached the timer display which indicated 27195d17h43m45s. "Zala, how long is 27,195 days? Roughly?"

"— Err..." the woman said as she quickly typed in something on her wrist computer, "Close to 74.5 years."

Calindra looked towards the dark hatches that surrounded them. Within the escape pods, she could feel the presence of a few life signs in each of them, but now she understood why she couldn't quite tell what they were. They seemed to still be unaware and dormant, and she figured they'd remain that way until the escape pods would engage upon entering a planet's atmosphere. However the disturbance in the Force wasn't in any of the escape pods. It was centered above them, somewhere above engineering... She searched the darkness.

"There!" she said pointing towards a humanoid shadow. "Shine some light up there... On the observation deck."

Assisted by the Force, Calindra pushed off the deck and sailed across the empty space that separated the engineering section and the observation deck, and then grappled the deck's guardrails, landing with a thud a few feet away from the form she’d spied earlier. There on the deck, chained to the guardrails was a robed figure. Its arms were extended and outstretched along the guardrail, and held in place by chains. The body itself was in a sitting position, its back turned away from the engineering section. Long and beautiful raven tresses of hair floated to either side of the female form's head, her face was shrouded in darkness.

Calindra's lightsaber made a snap hiss as she activated it to see better, and advanced carefully towards the body of what could only be a Jedi. The dark red glow of her saber lit up the Jedi's face which was contorted in rage. Its eyes were black marbles of alabaster staring blankly ahead of her, and the Jedi’s face showed signs of the mutation that Zala had hinted at, her face's bone structure apparently deformed by whatever biological agent that had felled the Zephyr's crew.

Suddenly, there was awareness in the Jedi, and Calindra recoiled at the slimy tendrils that snaked through her own mind. The Jedi's mind was still alive, even if the body was not, and she felt the malevolence behind the creature's dark eyes.

The heat from her lightsaber melted a lone tear on the Jedi's face, and Calindra couldn't stop her own eyes from watering. She wept for the pain the girl had suffered, and suddenly understood who had rigged the vessel and put those things into the escape pods. The Jedi had probably been on board the vessel when the outbreak happened. She was likely injured in the process, and knowing she had limited time, she had locked down the ship’s escape pods; hunted down the creatures, and was forced to kill the survivors as the disease coursed through her own veins... In an act of desperate retribution she had salvaged what she could of the dying ship and set its course in a final attempt at biting the hand that had done this to them.

With a swift motion from her hand, the Jedi's lightsaber floated into Calindra's left hand. A flick of her thumb, extended the blue blade with another hiss, before she carefully plunged it into the woman's frontal lobe, her own crimson blade hacking the head clean off its shoulders in one swift motion. The job done, she felt the tremor in the Force dissipate.

“Darkness take you. I only wish mercy could have come to you more swiftly,” Calindra said with her eyes cast down in regret. The woman had clearly suffered enough.

Jumping over the rail, she floated back down to the engineering deck, red and blue blade casting purple shadows around her before switching them off in midflight and landing on the deck next to the sergeant.

“Your orders, m’am?”

She knew the value of the biological research alone was priceless, but she didn't know at what cost. It had clearly cost this crew everything, and the Jedi's face would be etched in her mind forever.

Calindra was suddenly faced with a choice that would make or break her career. Either she ensured that such a thing never happened again, or she gave her superiors the vessels, which would undoubtedly be subjected to some biological research. Her father had often deplored putting such a destructive power in one person's hands, and in this particular case she wasn't sure it could ever be safely controlled or contained. A Death Star could only harm if you decided to pull the trigger, but this... This was virulent and chaotic. It probably couldn't be wielded correctly to stop further catastrophes.

"Can you reprogram the vessel to jump into hyperspace and crash into the nearest star, sergeant? I want this threat to Sith space destroyed, but we can't just blast it into a pile of debris and risk anything to spill out from the ship and contaminate other worlds. This needs to be contained."

"It should be fairly easy, m'am."

"Very good, get to it and download any data from the ships computers for analysis. There could be some valuable information in the ship’s logs. Also, reconfigure the escape pods to stay in lockdown. Nothing contaminated gets off this ship, understood?"

Hours later, their ship had jumped out of hyperspace ahead of the Zephyr. In turn, the Zephyr jumped into the system a mere minute behind them and Calindra watched as the ship headed for the blue dwarf star of the system they were in. It wasn't until the sun had devoured the entire ship and felt the life signs wink out of existence that she finally turned away.