



Intruders on Caina: Chapter 1

“Captain, incoming holo-transmission.”

The ship’s intercom roused Caileta from her statue-like stillness. Her eyes darted to the lower right corner of her screen and checked the chronometer - she had spent almost an hour in stupor over her unfinished report. And another one and a half hours before that in a mix of anxiety and depression.

“Who is it?”

She had not eaten or tidied herself up in the meantime and cursed herself for her negligence.

“The *Hoth*, Ma’am. Shall I patch her through?”

Caileta ran her fingers through her hair in an attempt to organize the mess, righted her uniform’s collar, and hoped she didn’t look as tired as she felt.

“Yes, Lieutenant. Thanks.”

The holo projector in the ceiling came online and casted the life-sized images of two men into her cabin and ready room. The smaller one was a fairly normal looking man, a bit roundish maybe, with brown eyes, hair and moustache. He wore a FT&L uniform just like she did, with the same rank insignia. The taller one looked like a textbook scoundrel and was smiling. Light bronze skin, yellow eyes, dark cornrows and an eye-catching tattoo on the forearm. Dressed in a wild mix of military and civilian clothes. *What the frozen hell... is he some kind of undercover agent, like Barrezz... Kamalas? Must be...*

“Gentlemen,” she started, “what can I do for you?”

Not to her surprise, it was the apparent civilian who answered.

“Telemetry, sensor logs, and voice recordings of the incident, and dinner at nine?”

She was prepared for the first part, but the question took her aback.

“What...? Excuse me, what did you just say?”

“Sorry for that”, the other Captain chimed in, “the Agent is rather special. I’m Captain Bort, *Hoth*. Agent Jester is here on the Emperor’s command.”

The named Agent showed a toothy grin as he was introduced, and took over again.

“You have some time to consider the invitation, but I’m afraid I must insist on all the logs.

Also, the *Yavin Runner* is to remain in a stationary orbit and monitor weather and movement around the crash site, as far as it’s observable at all. Congratulations. You’ve been transferred from patrol duty to being a satellite.”

With a nod, the tall man cut his transmission and left the Captains with each other.

Bort looked around, eyes not focused anywhere in her room, and then returned his gaze to Caileta.

“Sorry again. He’s... special. But the Emperor backs him. As far as I heard, these ships we command were his idea.”

“Sweet mother of... is he in charge, Captain?”

“Yes. Thankfully, he doesn’t infringe much. Anyway. The *Hoth* is returning to base. We will swap out our usual load of hover vehicles for tracked ones more suitable for the bad weather. Then the Agent will lead a force recon.”

“I hope he doesn’t get stupid over the loss of a fellow undercover agent.”

“I wondered the same, Captain Caileta. But guess what? When I found the courage to ask him, he said he’d never even heard of that guy.”

They were running late.

Nobody had ever said it in his presence. There was no reason. Everyone knew it, and nobody could change it. They simply had to get special equipment and vehicles to best a snowstorm on Caina, and in a system where ninety percent of the habitable space was either a jungle or a rocky desert, nobody hauled heavy arctic vehicles around. Well, nobody with limited space, as the *Hoth* provided it.

Corporal Yaatam of the Cocytus Empire's Special Operations Command checked his gear, a common Snowtrooper Armor, for the probably fiftieth and last time. These suits had been aboard before, they were compact enough. Satisfied with the result, he sealed the suit up properly and inspected the rest of his squad before he reported to his Sergeant and Lieutenant. Then he took position with his squad again. Five minutes until landing, the ship's loudspeakers announced.

The *Hoth* touched down and poured a man-made avalanche of durasteel, composite armor, and flesh into the snow. Eight tracked vehicles and more than sixty men infantry. And yet, it was nothing compared to the infinite walls of white the storm was throwing around.

They had touched down as close as ever possible, and Captain Bort wasn't sure if he could take off again with his ship light of cargo. Jorm had simply acknowledged the skipper's statement, pulled up the hood of his white arctic jacket, and strolled down the ramp. He could almost sense the Snowtroopers' and vehicle crews' bewildered looks on his light clothing, but the Force would keep him warm. And much more mobile.

All together, from the moment Captain Caileta had reported the mysterious ship's crash, over the reconfiguration of the *Hoth*, the grueling frozen hell march of the force recon party which had soldiers tied up to the interlinked vehicles and saw liberal, if subtle use of Jorm's powers just to clear the way and not get lost at some points, it took thirty-six hours for the group to come close to it's target.

The snow storm finally abated. There was still heavy snowfall, but the winds driving them had tired themselves out. *Or are gathering momentum for the next onslaught*, Jorm thought smirking. His com began to crackle.

"*Yavin Runner* on overwatch for *Hoth* and Recon on secure frequency, do you read?"

Caileta's voice was muffled and sounded a bit like insect wings, but that was a major improvement already. Barely one word in ten had been distinguishable in the storm. Major Hasek, the group's official commander, with his face unreadable under his helmet, answered.

"Recon reads you three out of five, *Runner*."

"*Hoth* reads you four out of five. Ship is clear, we can start within the hour" Captain Bort reported.

"Copy that, *Hoth*. Recon, we have a better sensor read now. You are almost spot-on, congratulations. The crash site is two clicks from your current position."

Major Hasek and Jorm exchanged a satisfied look as far as the helmet allowed while Cailleta updated their maps and bearings.

Another hour later, Corporal Yaatam found the first tangible evidence of the mysterious crashed ship. It must have been an antenna of some sort - it was long, slim, and had buried itself into the ground at one end, looking like an ice-cruled flagpole after the storm. It was swinging gently, and as he listened closely, Yaatam could hear the ice crack and flake off. His squad was the vanguard of the recon team, and he looked left and right to reassure himself of his men's proper positioning before he peeked through the infrared magnocular in his hands again.

*There.* Through the heavy snowfall, he picked up a trace of heat. *Finally.* He readjusted the device just to be sure and then called his superiors when the shape became clearer.

"Major, Agent, I have spotted the wreck. No visible movement. It is exactly where the *Runner* reported it to be."

"Confirmed, Corporal. Wait for Bravo Two and then get up close."

"Affirmative, Major!"

Major Hasek thought for a moment before he turned to Jorm and pointed at one of the tracked vehicles they had brought, a heavily armed and armored contraption.

"That's Bravo Two. Do you want a ride to the vanguard?"

"Much obliged, Major. I guess you'll secure the area in the meantime? Or whatever 'let the other guys stumble into traps first' is called now?"

The Major inhaled for a sharp retort, but dropped it when he saw Jorm's smile and a small, placating gesture. He would not miss the Agent's sense of humor. Jorm freed him from the need to reply by turning around and making his way over to the tank.

Hasek shook his head slightly and instructed the tank's crew over the comm.

It happened fast. Too fast for the vanguard. The snow cover exploded upwards just a few meters in front of them and revealed dull grey steel. A large - *no, gigantic!* - blaster cannon mounted high on the thing fired over Yaatam's head. The heat shock of the passing projectile was enough to throw him to the ground. Before he had a chance to even speculate what that thing was, he heard crackling, sizzling, and an explosion from behind - probably the tank exploding. A quick shoulder glance, and he saw his guess confirmed, but also the Agent who had rode on top pushing himself up from where he had landed. *Tough bastard.* He turned to face the enemy again and got his first good look. It was smaller than an AT-ST, but much more massive, with a roughly humanoid shape and weapons adorning arms and shoulders. *Is that a war droid?* The machine raised the arms and fired repeating blasters mounted there at two of his men. Surprised and in the open, they were cut down. Yaatam clenched his teeth and aimed his rifle at the thing, feeling totally helpless but obliged to at least try something, no matter how hopeless.

He didn't see Jorm picking up a man-sized sheet of exploded tank armor without ever touching it.

He didn't see the Sith pull the sheet through the snow in a line between the men and the machine with just a wave of his hand - just the wall of snow it threw upwards.

He didn't see the Kiffar arm and adjust a thermal detonator without even looking - just a flicker of motion as it went over his head, accelerated by means Yaatam didn't understand, and the two-meter-wide sphere of annihilation it ripped into the upthrown snow wall from behind.

He didn't see the Warrior coming. But he saw him jumping through the fading white sphere and bury a yellow lightsaber into the charred war droid, laughing.

The snow wall collapsed and obscured his view again. He pushed himself up and ordered his people to report in, temporarily ignoring Major Hasek's demands for a report of his own. As his men called in - all alive save for the two casualties - and he began filling the Major in, the rest of the snow finally fell and revealed a sweating agent - *A Forcie, dammit!* - and several bits and pieces of what now certainly was a war droid. He didn't think twice and ran up to the man.

But before he could reach him, more snow stirred, and more machines appeared...

The battle was over soon enough after it turned out that the new droids had been smaller units than the first one. Major Hasek had brought up his main force and bailed the leftovers of the vanguard out, then poured blaster fire into everything anorganic. The Force-wielding Agent had danced his own deadly dance between droids and plasma bolts, and reassured Hasek in his intention never to get on the wrong side of Cocytus' rulers. Now, he was working his way through the wreckage of the mysterious ship, hoping to find clues to its origin.

A call from one of his men caught both his and the Agent's interest. The Private stood by a corpse, charred in some places and definitely mangled by the blunt trauma of a crash.

He saluted and passed the item in his other hand to the Major: a helmet.

"Okay, Agent" Hasek spoke up after a brief moment of contemplation, "what do you think First Order troops are doing here, and since when do they employ droids?"

Jorm rubbed over the soot-stained faceplate, clearing the dirt off the non-white paint underneath.

"Nothing. These aren't Order freaks. These guys are something else."

He turned away and started towards one of the vehicles.

"Pack him and everyone else you can find in ice, I'll look at them later on the *Hoth*. And call that one in for pick-up, will you?"