**34 ABY – Aeserius System. Unknown Cave system**

**Sparky von Wagglehorn III**

 Darkness. It did not matter whether Sparky opened his eyes or closed them; his view was the same. Complete and total darkness blanketed his immediate surroundings. As he came to, his head pounding, he tried to remember what was going on as he fought the rising panic inside. The last thing he remembered was the Emperor Xen…or was it Fallax, detonating an explosion that led to many of Clan Scholae Palatinae’s finest soldiers and leaders to be stuck in this Gods forsaken cave system.

 Sparky took a deep breath and tried to focus on the calming exercises he had learned during his brief stint at the Jedi Academy. He focused on his surroundings. The air was cool on his face, yet there was a musty, stagnant smell that made him uncomfortable. As Sparky stood up, he focused on his body, checking for injuries. He slowly flexed his arms and extended his fingers without any pain. Good. He stood, gently extending his legs and stretching his back, again without pain. Very good. He spread his arms as wide as he could, hoping to get some sort of bearing on the cavity he was trapped in. His left arm felt only the cool air in the cave, but his right hand brushed up against a rough stone wall. Sparky stood still and attempted to listen, to hear something…anything that might give him some sort of guidance on where to go. He heard occasional undiscernible voices and shouts in the distance, echoing through the caves.

 With hope in his voice, Sparky shouted, “Hello! Is anyone out there? Hello! Hey! Help!” His heart sank. The undiscernible voices still echoed, but there was not any sort of acknowledgement that he could understand. He was alone. In a moment of realization, he grabbed his comlink from the bandoleer across his chest and spoke into it hurriedly. No response. He was truly, truly alone.

 Sparky took a knee on the stony dirt beneath his feet and took stock of his supplies. His combat harness still had two canteens with water. Dropping his right hand to his thigh, he was alarmed to discover that his slug thrower pistol had been dislodged in the explosion. He immediately checked his belt and signed with audible relief that his old lightsaber was still attached! Utterly worthless to him as a combat weapon, he’d always carried it as a sort of good luck charm and makeshift tool. He detached it with a click and gripped it tightly with his right hand, thumbing it to life with a *snap hiss.*

 Dim purple light filled the cave he was in. Sparky slowly turned in place. The ground was a stony mix of dirt and small rocks, chips that had broken from the cave in. The small cavern he was in was a 2 meter circle, with semi-jagged rock along the sides. A sort of ceiling sloped towards one side of the room until the ceiling met with the floor. Sparky took a few seconds to gently push on each of the walls surrounding him. To his surprise, one of the large rocks to his immediate left seemed to give slightly. Sparky deactivated his lightsaber and clipped it back to his belt as he squared off against the rock. He placed his hands along the roughhewn rock wall, took a deep breath and pushed with all his might.

 To his surprise, the rock gave away and light flooded into the small cavern he was in. His eyes blinked rapidly as he tried to quickly adjust to his new surroundings. A gentle wind, warm and fresh, gently coursed across him. He took a deep breath, and gazed at his new surroundings as he squeezed through the opening. The night sky above him seemed to contain a million stars that cast what little light they offered on the mountainous ground that now surrounded Sparky. He was on the side of a small valley, with grey and black rock surrounding him everywhere he could see.

 Sparky grabbed his comlink and immediately called his ship, the *Vanquisher*, which was in low orbit.

 “*Vanquisher*, this is Captain Wagglehorn, come in, over.”

 “Wagglehorn, this is CAPTAIN MacMar, give me your coordinates immediately, over.”

 Sparky hesitated. MacMar had been his XO only this morning when he’d left his ship this morning to attend Emperor Xen…Fallax’s summit meeting in the cave prior to the detonation. Was it possible that Sparky’s own ship had turned against him as well?

 Sparky hardened his voice and returned the call, “MacMar. I regret to inform you that your Captain still lives and your promotion was premature. My coordinates are as follows…” Sparky gave MacMar coordinates of the mountain range about 5 kilometers to the south along a ridge that he could see from his current vantage point.

 The *Vanquisher* responded, “Roger sir. Pick up enroute. ETA two minutes. Standby, *Vanquisher* out.”

 Sparky gazed towards the stars, unable to pick his ship out from the night sky. A few seconds passed when suddenly beams of brilliant red laser fire lanced from space. Sparky followed their trajectory and saw the pickup zone he’d given the *Vanquisher* disappear in a great and terrible ball of fire and burning rock.

 Sparky’s eyes widened and his stomach tightened. He sank to the ground in despair and began to shake as he realized how close he’d come to dying. He thought to himself, “Well it appears that my own crew has turned against me as well.”

 Seconds passed and turned into minutes as Sparky sat and thought. The minutes turned into an hour. He sighed and allowed his shoulders to slump. He couldn’t use his comlink, as he was supposed to be dead. Sparky didn’t know who, if any of the other CSP individuals had lived. Who could he trust? Sparky’s ears perked up as he heard a low hum of a starship in the distance. He tucked himself halfway into the cave he’d started in and looked upward. He wondered if the *Vanquisher* had sent fighters to confirm his death, though the hum didn’t have the distinctive whine of TIE Fighters.

 Around the destroyed landing zone 5 clicks south, Sparky could see the visually distinctive pattern of a Sheathipede-Class Transport Shuttle idly circling the zone. Sparky knew that even a basic scanner would be able to detect his life signs on this barren, hellish rock and wondered if the transport would detect that he was there.

 As if on cue, the transport began a lazy turn towards Sparky’s positions as floodlights from the ship began to canvas the area. In a matter of minutes, the Sheathipede landed on the flat rock valley floor just below Sparky’s current position. Sparky watched intensely as a humanoid figure descended from the craft’s landing ramp only a hundred or so meters below Sparky’s current position. His keen eyes identified that the humanoid had a male build. Sparky could make out pointed ears and deduced that this must be a Sephi. He was immaculately dressed, wearing what most species would consider a formal suit. The Sephi pulled a scanner out as Sparky tensed, waiting for the inevitable death that must be waiting for him.

 The Sephi glanced upwards at Sparky’s position and called out, “Hellooo my good man! I know you can hear me, and want to make you an offer, dear sir!” He paused, waiting for a response from Sparky.

Sparky didn’t respond, so the Sephi continued, “My name is Corm Josay. I’m a…business man of sorts, and see an opportunity for both of us. See my friend, I understand from my recent...acquisition of Imperial transmissions, that you, dear sir, are a wanted man who’s probably looking to get back to Judecca. I can get you there, but alas, I’ve recently hit some…challenging financial times, if you catch my drift…” As Corm ended speaking, he held both hands up in a gesture of mock surrender.

The silence hung in the air between them.

Sparky crawled from the space and called down to Corm, “Corm Josay, it would appear that I have no other options. You get me to Judecca, and I will see that you’re properly compensated if you get me there.”

Corm smiled broadly and motioned for Sparky to join him. Sparky began to descent the mountain.

NOTE TO XEN – If you’d like to reference this event. Feel free to have Corm actually working for you to round up survivors. I think Corm is going to be my next character, a Sephi freelancer.