**A Practical Guide to Galactic Domination**

**Chapter 2**

**Providential Newcomers**

“*Providence is the best advisor of my Empire. I never fail to heed its advice when it’s time to abdicate*.” Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful.

**Twenty-three years after the Battle of Yavin**

**Western Marches of the Inner Rim**

**Jakku System**

**Jakku**

Obviously, after returning from Niima Outpost, I had gone straight to the old mattress that I had used as bed for the last five years. In terms of comfort, the best thing I could tell was that it was better than sleeping on the freezing sand outside the fallen walker.

I tried finding something better to sleep upon these last years, I swear I did. But this is Jakku. You don’t exactly find a bed shop or someone selling you fancy articles to sleep better behind the first wreck...not one I would consider reliable anyway. There are always smugglers and traders eager to steal the content of your purse in exchange of promises they will forget the moment you’re not able to keep them honest.

Anyway, no, my home was not a palace. It had none of the nice accommodations of my queenly tent I had grown used to when I was Queen and campaigning against the Dead King.

Would I regret leaving it if I had to leave this sandy planet today?

The answer was a true and resounding no.

Honestly, there weren’t a lot of objects valuable I kept in this disabled AT-AT that would be difficult to replace. The computers I had extracted from a crashed Y-Wing and an officer’s station on the Star Destroyer *Steadfast* had proven very useful to learn Basic, Huttese, Binary and two other languages, explain to me the fundamentals of this galaxy’s engineering principles, but they were old, and guaranteed to be obsolete the moment I left the middle of nowhere.

And they were far too heavy to think about transporting them under my arm anyway.

As I opened the hatch of my home’s entrance, the package of my indispensable belongings was already done. It hadn’t taken long, and I didn’t know if I had to be pleased or dejected by the fact my most prized possessions held in such a tiny package.

I decided for ‘pleased’ as I prepared a plate of the legendary Jakku mash – old military rations mixed with a quantity of ingredients I didn’t want to know the provenance of. I lived on Jakku, but the only true things I wanted to take away from it were my hard-won money, my quarterstaff, the blasters I had repaired, and the red speeder I often called *Zombie* in memory of the good old times. A small survival kit, and all I had in spare food and water ended the list.

The sky was a shade of magnificent blue today, with absolutely no sand storm on the horizon. I tried to look for clouds as I finished swallowing my horrible-tasting breakfast, but I saw none.

“Providence or not providence?”

In more than a decade, I had seen little of the power of the Gods Above which was supposed to help the heroes.

On the other hand, yesterday evening, I had definitely sensed *something*. Assuming it was the work of some evil I was ‘destined’ to fight, providence should show me the way.

No, let’s amend this. Providence *must* show me the way. I wasn’t on the battlefields of Procer anymore. Jakku might be a small planet, but ‘small’ was relative when you were alone and had nothing save a speeder to search for ‘something which shouldn’t be on Jakku’.

“Scavenging or returning to Niima Outpost?” I asked to the dead Steelpeckers, expecting no answer.

In less time it took to say it, the undead birds collapsed, the power I had used to animate the corpses was extirpated and banished from their dead feathers and bones.

I grimaced internally. Apparently, I would have to be prudent with my words. That sounded very much like the work of Providence, all right.

I observed the dunes surrounding my refuge, searching for a sign, any sign of an unusual event happening on Jakku.

It took me a couple of minutes, but it eventually came.

The first to pass the dunes and arrive in my field of vision was the droid.

With only a few seconds, I was ready to bet it was ‘not from here’. For one, it was a model I had never scavenged inside the Imperial or Republic wrecks. It looked like a small sphere on a big one, and far more ‘dynamic’ for lack of a proper term, than the old astrogation and security mechanical toys I was disassembling and reassembling every year.

Secondly, it was clearly brand-new. And last but not least, it was painted in an orange-and-white theme. No smuggler or scavenger boss of Jakku had ever used these colours.

This droid hadn’t come to Jakku with the fleets which had fought the space battle more than fifteen years ago. It was a newcomer, and the two men following it were shouting it loud and clear.

Both were humans, and as they continued their progression in my direction, I acknowledged they weren’t that older compared to me in this second life.

But if they were both of the same species and the same sex, they were very different in their walk stance, their looks, and their clothes.

The first young man was black-skinned, moved like an infantry soldier about to be ambushed, and his eyes supported this first impression. This wasn’t a civilian playing soldier. His hair was cut extremely short like most of the armies and navies worthy of the name asked for their conscripts in this galaxy. The red armour with black markings he was wearing had seen better days. There were definitely impacts of lasers and solid projectiles on it, and most of the upper torso had been sprayed in blood a few hours ago.

The young man next to him appeared to be his complete opposite. While the red-clad man was evidently muscled and in the peak condition one expected from a frontline soldier, his companion was thin and had the looks one more associated with wealthy sons of the nobility eager to impress the girls. His clothes supported this theory, as over what looked a functional pilot suit, there a fashionable leather-like jacket. Moreover, while his hair were still short enough to be no problem for wearing a helmet, there were evidently not conforming to the ‘military standards’ shown by the other black-skinned man.

Quite clearly, this one was not a frontline fighter. I had seen a lot of humans and goblins like him back in my previous life: brash, prompt to ignore orders which didn’t interest them, and hot-headed when prudence was required. The moment you didn’t keep both eyes on them, you were sure to receive a lot of exasperated messages from the neighbourhood soon after.

The droid being far faster the humans, it was the beeping machine which saluted me first.

“And good morning to you too, little guy,” I said, finishing my breakfast and my first jug of water of the day. “You are far from home.”

The thrills of Binary were of a consonance which had few points in common with the usual Droid-speak that was used at Niima, and the orange-white foreigner had to repeat itself twice before I understood what it was asking.

“There is only one spaceport on Jakku, though it is more a limited landing field offering some services and a few beacons for smugglers and scavenging-traders.” Neither Niima the Hutt nor anyone else was ever going to try to invest more money on it to increase trade when the clients never came to this backwater planet. “It is about six kilometres away, direction south-west-west.”

“Six kilometres?” The accent of the pilot in leather jacket was one I had never heard before. His Basic was somewhat singing, it had elegant, soft tones going with it. And exhaustion was evident in his posture. “By all the asteroid fields of this galaxy, I am sick of this desert!”

“Well,” I took a playful tone, savouring the despair of the ‘hero’ providence had sent on my sandy door. “It’s six point three kilometres, if one wants to be accurate. Though if you want to have good news, two of the kilometres after this dune are going down, not up, and after this it’s even until Niima Outpost.”

“It is still likely going to be too long,” his black-skinned companion grimaced, and the orange-white droid beeped approvingly. “We have to leave this planet immediately. Is there a ship making regular travels to Bespin, or failing that, Cerea?”

The question was so unanticipated I almost laughed.

“You definitely are newcomers on Jakku, aren’t you?” The question was very rhetorical, and I left no time for him to answer properly. “There are no regular passenger transports to anywhere at our fair spaceport, sorry. We are on Jakku, paradise of scavengers, small smugglers, and sand storms. If you’re trying to go somewhere in space, it’s likely the destination isn’t serviced.”

“And the other spaceports?”

I smiled and bared my teeth to the exhausted white-skinned man.

“If there are other spaceports on Jakku, please tell me where they are. I want their planetary coordinates.”

The two foreigners groaned loudly in perfect synchronisation.

It was the black-skinned member of the duo who surmounted his disappointment first.

“Err...yes. Maybe we weren’t...aware of this beautiful planet’s details before setting foot upon it. But we really need to leave it now.” The salute he made after saying this was definitely military-trained. “I am Warrant Officer Finn Extes, this is Lieutenant Poe Dameron, and the droid is BB-8.”

The presentations were a bit late, but why not?

“Catherine Foundling, Jakkuvian Scavenger,” I drawled, making a very unprofessional Legion salute on my own. “Pleased to meet you Warrant Officer, Lieutenant, and Droid. You look like you have all enjoyed a long walk to come here.”

“Yes,” the young man who was apparently called Poe Dameron confirmed. “We walked all the way from Tuanu.”

“Tuanu Outpost?” I whistled. “It’s quite a miracle you came quite so close from Niima while walking in the darkness.”

Providence must have been really, really putting a finger on the scales to make sure they didn’t lose themselves in the Graveyard.

“And what pray tell were you doing at Tuanu?”

“Securing information of great importance for the security of the galaxy,” the pilot-clothed Lieutenant informed me in a very serious tone. “Unfortunately, the First Order attacked the Outpost during the negotiations. I was quite lucky Finn helped me escape in the dunes, because my X-Wing was destroyed in the first seconds of the assault.”

Assuming they were truthful when they told me they had marched all night, that meant the attack must have taken place yesterday evening. I had suddenly an unpleasant feeling what sort of dark, oppressing darkness I had perceived.

“Why would anyone attack Tuanu? The people living here are a bit touched in the head with their ideas of collecting trinkets from the Star Destroyers, but they aren’t causing harm to anyone.”

“They had plenty of non-humans in their village,” Finn spoke in a calm tone, but there was undertones of anger. “As far as the First Order is concerned, it is enough to be worth a death sentence.”

That was...that was incredibly racist, and I had seen a lot of it during my first life.

“Are they aware that for all humanity’s vast numbers, there are also trillion of non-human lifeforms in this galaxy?”

“I’m certain they are,” Poe Dameron declared grimly. “And after what I saw last night, I’m certain they have a simple and clean-cut solution to not share the galaxy with them.”

“We are speaking of genocide,” of which Triumphant – may she never return – and the Dead King had been guilty as sin on Calernia, but they had done it to their political and military opponents, not because they hated non-human lives.

“Yes.”

I whistled for the second time of this conversation.

“And here I thought that the crazies were supposed to have disappeared with the fall of the Empire.” And it raised also a very big question. “What are they doing there, by the way? I know we are a bit behind the news on Jakku, but I don’t remember being close to a nation calling itself the First Order.”

“No, you aren’t,” Finn tried to reassure me. “The First Order’s planets are on the galactic north-east, around the former Corporate Worlds and some regions populated by violent and barbaric cultures. The only reason they’ve been able to come here is because they use Q-ships for their operations, and bribe a lot of Republican Senators to close their eyes upon their crimes.”

“The Resistance is trying to put a stop to this!” Poe Dameron looked indignant. He might as well be. If the First Order was able to send murder teams on Jakku despite being a sovereign nation on the other side of the galaxy, this wasn’t a security failure, it was an abyssal fiasco on par with a first-rate military crisis.

“Emphasis on trying,” the black-skinned Warrant Officer nodded. “We have three Q-ships blockading the planet as we speak, and all of them have interdictor systems active. We would be very grateful if you helped us finding a ship capable of leaving this planet alive.”

I was familiar enough with the term ‘Q-Ship’ to know I needed more information than that. After all, this was a catch-all category for any merchant ship which had been converted in a corsair or any kind of military auxiliary for trade-hunting purposes.

“These Q-Ships. How big are they?”

“There are a bit smaller than the Imperial II class, about one and a half kilometres-long.”

I winced. Even counting a certain amount of inefficiency based on the fact these were certainly converted merchant starships, fifteen hundred metres in length and the kind of large hull the droid was prompt to beep me wasn’t encouraging at all.

Granted, a planetary blockade implied one had only to fight one of these Q-ships, not the three, but we were on Jakku. The only true warships of note were rusting on the sands of the planet, and they weren’t going to rise from the Graveyard to help us.

But the Warrant Officer seemed to have a good head on his shoulder, so I decided to give him the blunt and painful truth.

“This kind of firepower will easily massacre every hyper-capable starship on Jakku right now.” Pretending otherwise would be a monumental waste of time. “There may be a few hulls which have been modified enough to have the engines and systems allowing them to bypass a blockade like the one you described. We have plenty of smugglers at Niima, and based on the boasts of certain captains, I think we can find one which might have a chance to evade these Q-Ships.”

“You are very cautious,” Finn remarked.

“The condition for my help is that I go with you,” I retorted, “and no offense, but I intend to celebrate my one hundredth birthday in a few decades, not ending my life on orbit of Jakku.”

I was expecting a few arguments against it, but Finn surprised me.

“I was going to encourage you to do that anyway,” the black-skinned soldier accepted the jug of water I handed him. “The First Order is likely going to bombard this planet once they are finished here. There are too many non-humans living here, and they wanted to erase all traces of their intervention here before we set a foot on Jakku.”

“You know a lot about your commanders’ motivations, for a Warrant Officer.”

“I was a Corporal in the First Order, but that was a cover,” Finn corrected me.

“Mr. Secret Agent is in reality a warrant officer of the Pentastar Alignment,” Poe Dameron informed me brightly. “I suppose that makes our alliance quite unprecedented in galactic history.”

My air of incomprehension must have give it away most of the subtext was going over my head, because the jacket-man explained further.

“I am a member of the Resistance, an organisation which strives to ensure all the warlords and Imperial Remnants existing across the galaxy are respecting the articles of the Treaty of Kuat. The Pentastar Alignment, per its regular loud denunciations of the Treaty, is one of the biggest troublemakers we have to deal with.”

Finn shrugged.

“I was two years infiltrated in the First Order ranks, I am not exactly aware of the latest political complications. And honestly, I think my superiors will be far more interested in learning I prevented the bloody maniac from seizing a priceless database than being told I failed to kill you.”

“Yes, thanks for that,” the two men smiled at each other, with the kind of looks and expressions only warriors having shed blood together can share. “Returning to the issue of using a ship to evade the First Order’s blockade. Can New Republic Credits purchase something at the spaceport?”

“No,” I was prompt to disabuse him of that notion, “true Jakkuvians accept only real money.”

“The New Republic Credit is accepted in over a million systems!”

Finn coughed.

I raised an eyebrow of disappointment.

“Okay, there have been a few financial problems...”

“There is a couple of ‘time of troubles’ in the Republic galactic market every year, he means.” Finn interrupted him. “But yes, only Republic Credits for the Resistance. And I wasn’t able to take my First Marks before ‘deserting’.”

“They wouldn’t have done you any good,” I ‘reassured’ him. “Niima showed me one yesterday, but its value and credibility are low.”

“We are going to have to steal a ship, aren’t we?” Poe asked in a resigned tone.

I smiled.

“I saved a lot of money with my scavenging, but it was in the intent to purchase a passenger seat out of here. I certainly don’t have the Druggats for three passengers...” The droid beeped. “Excuse me, three passengers and a droid.”

As for buying a smuggling freighter or any kind of hyper-capable hull, it was best to not think about it. One could sooner expect generosity from Niima the Hutt than await the ship captains frequenting the Outpost to give you a fair price for their largest and most expensive possessions.

“I just hope the two of you can pilot it,” the black-skinned Warrant Officer commented. “I was trained to man standard defence turrets if I have to, but I don’t have the skills to pilot anything better than a speeder.”

“I should be able to do it, though it will be a bit different from my X-Wing,” Poe declared.

“And I should be able to play co-pilot, I’ve played with Republic and Imperial scavenged simulators for a few years,” I assured them. Obviously I was nowhere qualified to be a pilot – zero hours in real-time was a guarantee of disaster when under fire – but handling shields and the secondary systems should be doable.

“All right, I think we have the beginning of a good plan!” Seeing his roguish smile, there was no doubt in mind after these words: Poe Dameron definitely belonged into the ‘hot-headed hero’ category, and Finn and I had been picked along the way to form his Band of Five. The droid BB-8 was obviously the mascot, and we would likely pick two other members of our group at Niima Outpost or later in our ‘adventure’.

Just as I was thinking this, the recognisable shape of Imperial TIE starfighters appeared north of my home. And I didn’t need to be excellent at orienting myself to know they were flying in direction of the Niima ‘spaceport’.

“Six kilometres, you were saying?” Poe Dameron had returned to deadly seriousness in a few seconds.

There was an explosion and a column of smoke beyond the dunes.

“Six point three kilometres, yes.” At maximum speed on my *Zombie* speeder, it was not so bad. I had never tried to pilot one pursued by first-rate starfighters trying to kill me, of course.

At the rhythm things were going, Niima Outpost was going to burn when we arrived, and I would be blamed for it. No, I wasn’t pessimistic.

It was just that things never changed, be they on Calernia or in an entirely different galaxy...

**Author’s note**: A chapter with no action, though it’s not going to last. The chapter after that will see Catherine and the First Order troops meet each other for the first time, an event which one side isn’t going to appreciate at all.