

## Chapter 6 – Needle in a Sand Dune

The silent, empty streets were still dark and cool with the chill of night as we marched; proceeding into the narrow hallway heading toward the rendezvous point in the spaceport.

One by one, we filed down the stairs, and found ourselves in the service bay adjacent to the bay pit itself.

Instead of the sandy floor of an empty bay or the Sentinel ship we expected to find, there was a worn shuttle and a small gathering of men. While most were dressed in the simple desert cloaks and tunics of the region, one stood out from the others, wearing the military uniform and black cape of a graduate of the Imperial Naval Academy.

A Flight Officer dressed completely in black was checking names from a list and addressing the small gathering.

“ . . . and Samira Tevdeh. You men will be assigned to the starship *Dominator*. Our last recruit, Academy graduate Biggs Darklighter will be assigned as Third Mate to the starship *Rand Ecliptic*. We'll be under way shortly and delivering you to your assigned posts, please board now and find a seat.”

The flight officer caught sight of us as he wrapped up with his men and walked over to meet Rogue. Our CO stepped up to him, “I'm TD-1009. We were expecting a Sentinel ship from the Star Destroyer *Devastator*, circling above” and he gestured skyward with an extended thumb.

The caped graduate, Darklighter, cocked his head slightly to the side, listening to their conversation as the officer responded, “No 1009, I'm not your ride. The Sentinel is on its' way in, I'm just shuttling some new recruits offworld, although I did hear that the *Devastator* captured a ship of rebels yesterday.”

Rogue nodded, “That's right, we're searching for some sensitive data that was ejected from the ship during the fighting.”

Darklighter smiled and laughed quietly to himself as one of the other recruits leaned closer to him, “What's so funny?” The dark-haired Tatooine native turned a bit more serious, “I just realized my best friend was right about something, and no one believed him, that's all.”

A tech stepped out of the shuttle, “Sir, the Sentinel just signaled. We need to vacate the bay so they can land.” The flight officer spun away from Rogue and walked back toward his shuttle, calling back over his shoulder, “Good Luck in your search, TD-1009. OK, Everybody in!”

The small shuttle powered up as Biggs Darklighter took a last, slow look around and whispered, "I'll be watching for you, buddy" and boarded. A 'droid scurried around removing the fueling lines from the ship's belly as her hatches sealed; then she rose out of the bay and away into the deep blue of the morning sky. For a few moments there was silence. Then, the whine of the drop ship's engines rained down on us as it moved into the space over the pit opening. It carefully

descended, coming to rest just beyond where we were standing.

The Sentinel-class troop drop ship. Sienar Fleet Systems and Cygnus Spaceworks had borrowed heavily from their elegant Imperial shuttle design in the development of the Sentinel-class landing craft. My helmet display rapidly cycled through several ships and finally displayed a schematic for the ship before me.

Its' enlarged cargo hold could carry six squads (a total of 54 soldiers) as well as a dozen repeating blasters and six speeder bikes. It boasted four deflector shield generators, four retractable laser cannons, two concussion missile launchers, an ion cannon, a bank of rotating repeating blasters, and optional combat armor plating. To be fully manned, it required a command crew of five, which includes the pilot, the copilot/sensor officer, and three gunners. In the field, they were generally flown with a pilot and a sensor officer with the gun controls slaved to the pilot.

The Sentinel's removable seating units allowed the ship to be quickly converted to a straight combat vehicle delivery vessel or troop-deployment drop ship. In this mode, the landing craft could carry three dozen speeder bikes or a dozen compact assault vehicles. As the dual rear cargo bay doors opened to the sides and the ramp lowered, we could see that, in fact, the seats had been removed and 3 Dewbacks and a Bantha were tethered to restraints in the floor plates. Several troops marched down the ramp toward us as the smell of the Animals wafted out of the hold, washing over us.

Rogue removed his helmet, "I'm the CO, Captain", speaking as the lead trooper from the ship crossed to us.

The other trooper removed his bucket as well, "I'm Captain Tyrell. We have swept the portions of the planet that were exposed, possible landing sites for the pods. Two have been located, neither had the plans inside. There is a third signature that we picked up out in the Dune Sea, way beyond the city here, even beyond the borders of the moisture farms and the Jundland Wastes. We were going to inspect the site, but time was nearing for us to meet, so we aborted. A few of my men will continue on with you. The flight crew has been rotated. The remainder of my crew and I will catch some rest. Let us know if you recover anything of interest." And he snapped a salute to Rogue, who returned it.

None of the locations Tyrell had described held any meaning for us yet, we would have to review the data charts in the shuttle to get a better feel for where we were heading. He and his troops disappeared up the stairs toward the city as we entered the rear of the cargo area. One of the troopers left behind came forward into the light as we walked up the boarding ramp, "We have a lot of ground to cover between here and the indicated point of impact. I'm TD 1023, Davin Felth. Welcome aboard. Pilot! Let's go!"

I shook his hand, "TD 2187, Terek Deckard" and continued on to the jumpseats. Rogue and 4120 were reviewing the log and the navigational charts as the engines came back online, and the flight crew prepared to head back out.

We all strapped in as the ship lifted clear of the bay pit. The darkness of the cool Tatooine morning was shattered as Tatoo I broke the horizon, streaming sunlight across the sands and rocky terrain, slicing across the highest peaks of the domed buildings.

As we disappeared into the distance, the Corellian freighter 0600 and I had searched the day before, the freighter owned by the Wook and the Human, silently rose out of her docking pit into the morning air and flew off toward the little town of Mos Espa, even though her destination was a much closer section of the nearby mountains between Mos Espa and Mos Eisley.

\*

The Dewbacks and Bantha were grunting and shifting, trying to maintain their footing as the ship rocked side to side. One of the desert lizards snapped his tail against the side wall with a deafening thud. Felth was sitting, strapped in between Danz and Blade, several seats down from me. He yelled in my direction to be heard over the engines and the livestock, "The pod's signature was pretty weak. We're going to need these guys to help us cover the ground near the impact site", he gestured toward the dewbacks. I nodded, as the ship raced away from the spaceport of Mos Eisley toward the open expanses of the Dune Sea.

The sand seemed to go on endlessly in every direction; rolling dunes that shifted with the hot winds, changing the landscape before your eyes, if you watched closely enough. 4120 was manning the navigator's station, and watched as we drew nearer to the small pinging mark on the scope. "Just ahead. Find a place to set her down" he said. "We should do the rest on foot, or we might miss it entirely".

The pilot nodded, and the craft slowed and rolled to the right. The Dewbacks scraped at the deck trying to maintain traction as the craft pitched into the turn. I heard the gear extending beneath us, and then the gentle bump as we contacted the sand, and settled in.

The engines wound down, as the flight crew exited the cockpit. Rogue released the rear door seals and opened the broad doors wide allowing the already warm morning air and bright orange sunlight in. As the others exited into the sand, Etz, Topolev and I released the clamps tethering the Dewbacks to the deck plate. We coaxed them down the ramp into the sand, leaving the Bantha behind for now. Felth was eager to get moving. He seemed to want to impress his Captain by locating the pod.

The tanned Ronto-leather saddle strained and stretched as Etz grabbed the hanging straps of the fur-covered saddlebag pouch and climbed onto the back of the of the first Dewback. Topolev and 4120 did the same, climbing onto the remaining two sand lizards. They settled into the large leather saddles and retrieved the Dewback stun prods from their protective pouches, screwing the long poles together in the center.

The giant animals shuddered a bit beneath them as the lumbering beasts adjusted to the weight of the riders. 4120's Dewback roared, and bucked abruptly as he shocked the beast just behind the head with the long stun prod. The angry animal turned and wandered slowly off toward the

nearby ridge, shaking its head and kicking up a spray of sand with each step under its' powerful limbs.

As Etz lowered the front of his prod to shock his Dewback into action, the mount cried out, shaking his head and hurrying to catch up with 4120. Falker, 1265 and Taka walked ahead, in their tracks. 0600 and I followed close behind them with Rogue, Ddraig and Felth.

All of us on foot walked in a staggered formation, fanning out, advancing off toward the horizon, scanning in every direction for a glint of sunlight, a blown hatch, any hint of a part of the ejected pod. It came hurtling from space, and impacted somewhere near here without firing its braking thrusters. There should be some visible evidence; a crater, scorched sand, something.

We walked on for quite some time, over several large dunes finding still nothing each time we crossed the next crest. Rogue raised the Sentinel crew on his commlink, and asked for another sweep to try and pinpoint the target a little more precisely. We had walked to the bottom of the next valley before they flew overhead and swept past us over the next several dunes. I pulled out my macrobinoculars and snapped them on, scanning the horizon line.

The problem with the rolling dunes out here was that the horizon could be a days' walk or a short hike depending on the size of the dune that was in front of you. I snapped them off again. They were pretty useless from the ground, unless things were to flatten out more. "All these dunes are starting to look alike."

Etz sat up tall in his saddle, straining to see, as the comm crackled, and the Sentinel crew reported a sharper ping on the beacon just over the next ridge.

\* \* \*

The landing gear of the Corellian freighter settled into the sand and her engines wound down as the captain switched off all systems in the cockpit, "We're in good shape, nobody followed us."

The Wook was opening a panel cover in the wall of the engine compartment when the human walked past, yelling back over his shoulder as he reached into his personal bunk space for a tool box, "Chewie, let's wait on that. Take the rest of those cases out of the smuggling compartments and put them in the cache. You never know when we might need to use that space, and they'll need to be empty. When you're done, I need you to check out the targeting system for the upper quad gun array."

The Wookiee grunted and growled a reply as he closed the panel back over and instead grabbed a small electromagnetic handle. He made his way toward the top of the boarding ramp and knelt down. Placing the handle on the floor plate, he pressed the button set into the grip, firmly attaching it to the plate. His Wookiee arms easily lifted the first of the heavy metal panels. Once opened, he set to work digging out a half dozen cases of contraband spice from beneath the deck.

The human captain walked down the access ramp behind his co-pilot, carrying his tools. He set them down and stripped off his vest and shirt, dropping them in a careless pile at the bottom of the ramp next to the tools. As the Wook walked past him with an armful, Solo stepped off the ramp into the sand and moved beneath the ship, opening an access panel in the underbelly.

It was still fairly early in the day, but the twin suns were already beating incessantly down on Tatooine. The massive hull of his ship overhead shielded him from the direct rays, but the heat was all around, radiating up from the sand. He reached inside the panel opening up to his elbow as he checked on the integrity of some of his *custom modifications*. Several of the specialized parts needed re-seating. He reached into the box for a tool and set to work.

The shaggy co-pilot had walked several meters away from the ship carrying the metal cases full of smuggled Kessel spice, up a steep incline. They had originally had MUCH more spice onboard, but were forced to eject most of the obvious, visible cargo when they were threatened with boarding by an Imperial blockade.

These hidden cases were all that remained of Jabba's shipment now.

It would not be enough to appease the Hutt's anger over his loss, and could be sold in the future for cash without him being any the wiser. He turned and looked around, scanning the cliffs and canyons to make sure no one was watching and to ensure that the Krayt Dragons that nest in the nearby rocks were otherwise occupied.

Smuggling spice was not something he thought he would ever do, but it had become a necessary part of his life after the fall of the Republic, and was part of his duty to repay his life-debt to his friend, Captain Solo. It also kept him connected to Tatooine and in frequent, inconspicuous contact with the aging General, for the inescapable duty Yoda had entrusted to him.

The enormous Wookiee knew that call to duty was now fast approaching. He moved toward a dark shadow among the rocks of the cliff face and stepped right into the darkness of the narrow slot, disappearing into an all but hidden cave.

The cool of the shadows here was welcomed as the Wookiee carried his armful to the rear of the cave. He squeezed between stacked crates of blasters and rifles, a lockbox of money, military medical supplies and other various recovered treasures from his many years of flying co-pilot to Han Solo. This was one of several private stashes of goods, money and arms for whatever opportunity might come their way. The Wookiee reached the back wall of the cave and stacked the cases of Glitterstim on the ground, then turned and walked back to the entrance of the dim cave, to head back to the much-needed repairs awaiting him.

He stopped abruptly inside the entryway to the cave, standing motionless.

A huge scale-covered leg was making its way past the opening, followed by a whipping tail. The Wookiee leaned forward slightly, peering around the rocks, one hand on his crossbow. A fully matured male Krayt Dragon had been just outside, on patrol, guarding its home. This smugglers cache of Solo's would never be in any danger of being pilfered. Few had the stomach to be so

close to the nesting area of the huge beasts. Even the Tusken Raiders left them alone. When the area was clear, he moved out of the cave and down the hill to the ship below.

\* \* \*

We all turned toward the hovering drop ship and walked in the direction of the next dune of mounded sand hopefully lying between us and the pod. The early morning heat was taking its toll. Our body gloves were straining to keep us cool, and our environmental packs quietly whirred away pulling moisture from the air for us to drink, but the glaring, reflected heat from all of the sand wasn't helping our search efforts. We made our way up to the top of the ridge and once again looked for any indication that a pod had come down here.

A hot, gusting breeze blew small intermittent streams of sand across the ground, giving the appearance of a low-lying, tan fog. The tiny stone particles whipped against our boots and shin armor with a sound similar to that of swift running water.

At first, there was nothing out there to be seen. Then Topolev spotted something. He was up high on the Dewback, and could see over this small valley into the next. "There's definitely something there. Not sure if it's our pod, but there's something."

We all raced down the incline of the dune into the valley, sand and dust spraying up against our leg armor from the rapid advance. Then we mounted the eroding sands of the slope on the far side, slowly making our way upward. With each step, I felt my boots sink down up to my ankle in the sand, slipping, and making very little forward progress.

The Dewbacks dug in and climbed with their broad, flat feet up the sandy embankment, pushing mounds of sand down in their wake. As we cleared the top of the ridge line and caught our breath, we were treated to what Topolev had seen. It was unmistakable. We saw it. We all saw it. We had found the impact site.

A wave of accomplishment and relief settled over us. Lord Vader would not need to make an appearance here after all. Rogue ordered the drop ship to set down on the ridge. We all moved down the slope, sand spraying once again against our shin armor as we half stepped and half slid down the steep grade.

As we drew nearer and nearer to the impact site, what had looked like shadow from a distance, became the unmistakable marks of eroded footprints in the immediate vicinity of the pod. If there had been tracks any further out, they had been wiped clean by the winds.

Topolev and Etz remained on their Dewbacks. 4120 dismounted and walked about with his rifle lowered, surveying the skyline. He and Taka watched our backs as we advanced.

Falker, Ddraig and Blade surveyed the area around the pod with 0600. The barely visible marks in the sand that remained gave no indicator as to whether or not they led to, or away from the crash site. The pod could not have made it past our gunners with someone on board. They would

never have let it get past. It must have been the desert scavengers and their Sandcrawler. But if it was the Jawas, their crawler would surely have left far deeper tracks than these footprints, and they would likely have taken the entire pod.

"This doesn't make any sense! Do these tracks lead to, or away from the pod?" asked Rogue.

0600, Danz and Falker moved in closer and inspected the inside of the pod. Danz stepped back out into the sand, "Nothing here", he reported, "No data recordings, nothing, but I can tell you someone opened the hatch . . . from the inside."

Felth and I walked slowly along the line of prints in the sand, buckets down, checking the ground for clues, anything. Felth knelt down as Rogue looked back at the pod. He noted the direction of the prints and how they curved away from the impact site. "Well, if the hatch was opened from the inside then the only thing that makes sense here is that . . ."

He paused, turning away from the pod, his eyes scanning the directions the tracks seemed to indicate. "Someone was in the pod. The tracks go off in this direction", he said, pointing his E-11 across the dunes as the realization hit him.

Felth abruptly stood up from his crouch, examining a small metallic ring in his hand, rocking it back and forth for Rogue to see. "Look, sir, Droids!"

Rogue let the comment sink in a moment before responding. "That certainly explains why no life forms were scanned by our gunners. Now we know that the data made it to the surface, and that a 'droid must be in possession of it. We also know it presents us with a whole new issue." He paused for a breath as he scanned the horizon. "Which 'droid, and where is it now?"

Felth shook his bucket. We were back to the first step of our search again. Rogue knew it, we all knew it. "Judging from the tracks, we're looking for a biped of some type." said 0600. Rogue nodded his agreement. "A bi-pedal 'droid that is used to starship duty and finds itself walking in an environment like this couldn't have made it very far on foot." He switched on his comm, "Sentinel crew, recalibrate the search parameters and prepare for dust-off. We need to do a more specialized sweep of the surrounding areas. We're looking for 'droids."

\* \* \*