

## Chapter 7 – Droid Hunt

The Wookiee had the complex targeting system from the upper quad gun array torn apart and scattered across the boarding ramp. He probed the exposed circuitry with a diagnostic scanner in search of the problem.

Captain Solo was working down inside one of the engine vents on the rear upper hull when he heard a loud Wookiee growl echoing off the surrounding hills as his co-pilot lost his patience with the job he was working on down beneath the ship. Solo stood up into the bright sunlight, squinting and grinning broadly at the familiar, frustrated growl of his friend, and laughed to himself.

He bent back down inside and sprayed lubricant on the louvered heat dispersing vanes under his feet. He reached down and worked the vane back and forth with his hands until it moved freely. In his mind he pictured his frustrated first mate. Laughing a bit to himself again at the thought of the irritated Wookiee, he climbed out of the open vent wiping a thick, dark fluid from his hands with a red rag before throwing it down on the metal skin of his ship.

As he replaced the gridded vent cover he yelled out, loud enough to be heard below. “Relax Chewie, I’ll be right down and give you a hand”.

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I watched as wave after wave of sand in this barren Dune Sea washed silently beneath the low-flying drop ship.

As our search wore on, there was no escaping the smell of our animal passengers in the cramped cargo area. Etz called out as he spotted a cascade of bones from a large beast stretched out over a ridgeline beneath us, "Hey, check that out." Felth stood, looking out the gunner's viewport.

I leaned forward and nodded as I looked out. 0600 poured the sand from his boots into a small pyramid on the deck, “That’s the bones of a Krayt Dragon. They’re usually found in the rockier parts in mountain caves, but they come here, to the dunes to die. Banthas do the same thing. Somewhere out here there’s a Bantha Graveyard full of bones. Sometimes the older local kids used to skip classes and waste the day out here looking for it.”

Although we had been sweeping for hours, the scanners had not picked up any droid signatures yet. It was late in the day, and the twin suns were sliding toward the horizon when 0600 spotted tracks in the sand beneath us. The pilot circled back around and dropped down closer to the surface to check them out.

He set us down beside the tracks and released the door mechanism. We exited down the rear ramp into the sand to check out what 0600 had seen from the air. Rogue and I knelt, examining the depth of the tracks as Falker looked off toward the hills in the distance. The tracks were

definitely not from any organic creature. They were made by something large, and with great weight bearing down on a mechanical drive system, no repulsor field for this vehicle. Perhaps these were the tracks of the elusive Sandcrawler.

Topolev was crouched momentarily, also examining the tracks. He stood, following them with his eyes. They headed in a straight line toward the sharp, upward thrust range of sand-swept stone mountains that Falker was staring at. "They're heading off that way, toward those hills in the distance."

Danz and Falker agreed, "Let's go." We boarded the ship, dusted off quickly and raced toward the stony mountains, following the tracks.

We set down near the base of the hills, and once again we all filed out the back, leaving the animals behind to eat on large bales of food, and the doors open wide to help ventilate the hold and relieve the smell. There were small foot tracks, many appearing among the larger, vehicular tracks, and then fanning out, leading up into the hills following several paths. These may very well have been Jawa tracks.

TD-0324 and a couple of other troopers from Tyrell's flight crew walked off on their own, following one trail of tracks up the sharp embankment of a ravine.

We followed a snaking trail of the small tracks up into the hills as we drew our blasters, powered them on and holding them at the ready. There was no telling what might be found among the rocks ahead. TD-0324 and a couple of other troopers from Tyrell's flight crew walked off in another direction, following a branching trail of tracks up the sharp embankment of a ravine.

We were about halfway up the coarse embankment, scanning for life when I heard the same throaty cry I had heard howling on the wind outside the Cantina. It was joined by a chorus of several other howls and wails and grunting followed by a horrible scream and a discharged E-11 blast, then several other quick blaster discharges followed by silence.

My group turned and doubled back, quickly scrambling in the direction of the noise. We came over a sandy rise and saw a robed, grunting creature with a disfigured head stooping over TD-0324, rummaging through the Impervium utility belt at his waist. There were 3 dead troopers lying scattered behind it and several other creatures were racing away further up the hill on foot.

As we appeared, the creature rose, turning toward us, standing tall and thrusting a meter-long metal club over its' head and letting out an even louder war cry. We could now see that the head was not misshapen or disfigured, it was wrapped with bandages. It had a breather opening at the mouth and metal portals where the eyes should have been. Metal spikes were randomly thrust out of the bandages on its' head, giving it an even more fierce appearance.

The head wraps and loosely draped garments were a primitive form of desert survival, protection from the sands and winds in this wasteland. It was shaking the club back and forth over its' head as it wailed and snarled from beneath the head wrappings. One end of the weapon was curved

into a blunt, round club head with a sharp center spike. The other end tapered into a spike surrounded by sharp, bladed fins. This end was covered in the blood of the impaled trooper lying at the creature's feet.

We all froze for just a second, not quite sure what to make of this thing. It was 0600 that reacted first, lowering his blaster rifle and blowing a gaping hole through the chest of the wailing desert nomad. It fell to the sand in a heap, dropping the club as smoke curled away from the wound imposed by the sudden burst of energy from the heavy rifle.

We walked closer to get a better look. I raised my eyes and blaster, scanning the cliffs around us, in case the others were watching, waiting for a chance to attack the rest of us. There did not appear to be any that I could see. This trooper and the others were dead, as was the creature. "Tusken Raider", said 0600, kicking the twitching leg of the body lying in the sand. "The locals also call them Sandpeople. These things are not to be messed with", he said as he walked over to the discarded weapon and picked up the dropped Gaffi stick.

He turned the war club over in his hands as he slowly walked a bit further up to the plateau at the top of the hill. "Check this out guys", he called back down to us as his eyes swept across the rocks. We walked up to the top of the ravine and he pointed across the flat mesa to a cave in the face of the wall just ahead. "I bet we find the others in his raiding party, or maybe a fugitive droid in there", he said, pointing to a small opening in the rocks.

Rogue and the others circled around a large rock and moved in closer to the cave to get a better look. 0600 was looking over the heavy club as I walked past to join the search group, "I think I'm gonna hang on to this", he said, "You never know when it might come in handy." I nodded in agreement, "Nice little trophy too." He walked after me toward the cave.

4120, 1344, Danz, Etz and I entered the cave as Rogue, 0600 and Topolev covered us, watching the cliffs surrounding the plateau. Confident there were no Tusken to our rear, they followed us inside, leaving Taka to guard the entrance. Our infrared bucket imaging systems flickered on in the darkness of the cave. It smelled of death in here. The remains of several small desert animals lay on a small rock inside, most had been slaughtered and eaten, but what pieces remained permeated the room with a foul smell. Topolev found several clubs resting against the cave wall as we advanced, "Those are mine when we head out", he said, pointing to the Gaffi sticks.

Danz picked up a small mechanical device off the floor of the cave, and shrugged, "I can't be sure, but it looks like a calibration tool of some kind. I bet they bought it from our Jawas". We spread out as the narrow entrance room expanded into a darker, larger cavern with craggy stalactites hanging from the ceiling. A few shabby blankets were wound into sleeping nests on the uneven ground in the darker areas near the walls.

Rogue went to examine them as Etz happened to look up at a sudden movement among the rocks overhead just in time to see a Tusken dropping down howling; its bladed gaffi pointed straight down for the kill. Instead of being stabbed through his neck and down into his chest, the blade struck him on his protective shoulder armor and glanced off, knocking him to the ground. Another creature jumped on Danz, who swiveled away and cracked the creature square in the

face with the butt of his rifle, driving the metal eyepieces back into the skull beneath the wraps. In the ensuing confusion, I was knocked to the floor from behind by the blunt end of a gaffi in my back.

My bucket flew off and rolled aside as the creature jumped over me wielding the club and howling. Etz blew a hole through the Tusken on top of him and rolled over, taking aim at the one just struck by Danz, but Falker beat him and Topolev to it, blasting a smoking hole through the bandaged neck of the beast. 0600 turned abruptly at the waist, jamming the gaffi stick he held firmly through the chest of the Tusken charging him as Topolev blasted it. 4120 took aim at the creature struggling with me but couldn't get a clear shot.

I kicked the feet out from under the robed Tusken standing over me and rolled to my feet as the creature rose up, flailing its stick at me in wide arcs, cutting through the air just in front of me. I jerked my head back out of the way to avoid being struck, but was a second too late, as the sharpened spike on the tip of the weapon sliced through the skin on my brow. As the sharp tip flew by again, I reached up, grabbed the Tusken by the neck, jammed the muzzle of my blaster in the flailing creature's mouth and quickly pulled the trigger. I saw a bright red flash in the eyepieces, and the limp Tusken corpse dropped to the cave floor.

I spun back to the others with my blaster held out, squinting to see in the dim light. They had their blasters pointing my way. When they realized it was me, they quickly holstered them. I bent down and picked up my bucket, putting my gloved hand to my forehead. When I pulled it away, blood covered the palm and dripped freely from my sliced head.

We turned back toward the entrance of the cave and walked past Taka back out into the light of the day. I wiped the blood from my face and eyes, and pressed hard against the slice wound as I took a seat on the small rock just outside. Topolev came out behind Danz carrying an armful of the deadly spiked metal clubs. "There's one here for each of us, if you want them."

I opened several of the belt compartments on my utility belt searching for bandages. The first had reinforced cord and a small grappling hook, the second a small concussion charges. Finally I found the right one with several small packages of bandages and a topical bacta spray. Topolev dropped a gaffi beside me. Etz and 0600 walked past me as I squeezed my split skin together and stretched the bacta-coated bandage in place, pressing it down hard. I looked up, "Hey, is your shoulder OK?"

He looked back, "Yeah it's fine, I was lucky. How's the head?"

"I'll live."

0600 walked around the corner and called back to us, "I thought this was where we were. Behold gentlemen, the ruins of the first B'omarr Monk temple on Tatooine." It was a small ruined pile of stone. I stood up and we all walked over for a closer look.

"The B'omarr built this small shrine as a gathering point to meditate in the tranquility of the desert after the crash of their starship, right over there", he said pointing to another of the sandy peaks.

The shifting sands over the centuries had all but buried the remnants of the B'Omarr vessel, but the main drive thrusters could still be seen protruding from the cliffside.

"The first B'Omarr had a temple here. This small shrine was just the top of a network of tunnels and caverns inside these jagged hills, but that, gentlemen, is a story and excursion into the desert for another time", and he walked away from the small crumbling building. "The monks built a much more heavily fortified palace further out in the Dune Sea before they began shedding their bodies. We may pass near it later if we continue on our previous course."

"Excuse me, did you say 'shedding their bodies?', asked Etz, rubbing his shoulder.

0600 grinned wide beneath his bucket, "That's right. After the palace was completed, the monks all underwent a procedure that removed their brains from their bodies, and placed it into a life-supporting nutrient-rich liquid in clear jars. They felt if they were free from the restraints of the physical body, their meditations would take them deeper into understanding the universe. There's a small army of spider-walker 'droids in the palace. They remove the jars from the central meditation chamber when a monk has the desire to move about."

Etz said nothing more.

I stood up, holding my head, "These Sandpeople must have bought that calibrator from the Jawas. Those 'crawler tracks were recent. We need to be looking for Jawas, and their Sandcrawler. They must have picked up our wandering 'droid." I walked to the edge of the plateau and looked down into the vast valley stretching out before me. Tatoo I had just sunk beneath the mountains on the horizon, and Tatoo II was not far behind. The landscape in this direction was brutal. "Sandcrawler or not, they didn't go this way."

0600 nodded his bucket in agreement with me. "You're right about that. Even a 'crawler wouldn't make it through that. We need to head back to the ship and set our sensors for a Jawa Sandcrawler. That should be a little easier to find than a half-buried escape pod or a lost 'droid."

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The ride was fairly smooth as we raced the Sentinel across the sands in search of the large mechanized transport of the Jawas. The second of the twin suns was almost setting as we raced through a pass in the low hills. 0600 sat forward, "There's the palace." We all looked out the gunner's port as we moved past the massive structure.

Etz sat back uneasily, contemplating the dismembered brains walking about inside. 0600 spoke under his breath; more to himself than anyone else. "They're not the only tenants anymore."

As our ship disappeared toward the horizon, an occupant emerged from another ship that had

landed just outside the monks Palace. He stepped off the extended ramp into the sand, the heat baking his Mandalorian armor.

There was a job to be done. He had been called in to help collect from a smuggler, by one of the Palace's newer tenants, Jabba the Hutt.

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The second of the two suns was disappearing beneath the horizon as Captain Solo snapped the last piece of the targeting system back in place under the long barrels of the upper Quad-Gun array.

"It's getting dark, let's finish this up. We can stay here tonight and head back to the spaceport in the morning. I want to take a quick inventory of the cache, and I have more work to do inside anyway."

The Wookiee barked a response as he re-connected the power couplings and cycled through a synchronization process on the gun. When it finished, he slipped into the adjacent gunner's chair and grabbed the controls. The small display monitor before him flickered to life as the guns rose on the outside of the ship, mimicking his movements. He howled again, appearing satisfied. Outside the window, Solo stood up and stepped away from the swiveling guns, heading for the top hatch.

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Tatoo II had settled just below the horizon and it was almost dark when we dropped over a ridge and came across what we had been searching for. There, just ahead, stopped for the night, with a camp made and fires blazing, was not one, but two of the massive Sandcrawlers.

Our pilot rolled toward them and set down just outside their camp. We could see the little creatures scurrying around their huge vehicle as we disembarked.

As we walked away from the Sentinel and drew closer to the Crawler, we could see many of the little creatures hiding behind the massive treads of their vehicle, watching us closely to see what we would do. One Jawa warily left his hiding place and walked slowly over to us with his arm outstretched, as if to welcome us. He jabbered several small phrases before 0600 could switch on his bucket translator.

A series of small whistles issued from his helmet as it scanned the translation algorithms trying to convert to speech. Then he nodded his head, "I've got it. It's a little broken, must be the local dialect, but I think I can translate it."

0600 spoke to the little creature, and his bucket emitted a series of garbled messages, converted to the Jawa language. "We are looking for a 'droid that you may have found wandering in the

desert. It probably looks like us, with 2 legs." The small, brown-robed creature seemed to think a moment and then respond. "Many 'droids and scrap we have, from the wastes, but no recoveries of any that stand and walk as you do. I check with the others" and he turned and ran toward the front tread on the looming Crawler.

Rogue instinctively raised his rifle at the quick movement, but 0600 waved a hand. "It's OK, he's just going to see if any of the others know anything. He says they have many droids. Some collected from the wastelands, but they haven't picked up any bipeds." Several other Jawas poked their heads around the side of the vehicle and joined the messenger, yellow eyes glowing brightly in the dim twilight. They all turned their backs to us and began to jabber among themselves, but turned around several times to check on us.

When the small band had finished discussing the 'droids, the little leader returned to us, saying that the driver of the other Crawler had not recovered any bipeds either, but noted that there was at least one other Crawler out in the Dune Sea that may have. 0600 thanked the little creature and stood up to face Rogue. "They don't know anything about a biped 'droid. We surprised them, they're pretty shaken. He would have told us." We all lowered our blasters and filed back on board the drop ship. "Back to square one", said 4120 as he sat down in his jumpseat. "Yup", replied Blade.

The little Jawa scratched his head, watching as our drop ship lifted off into the bright, fiery orange of the dying daylight.

He wondered if perhaps any of us might possibly have been interested in the little blue astromech the other, third Crawler out in the dunes had recovered among the rocky canyons at the edge of the wastes.

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