

## Chapter 8 - Interrogations

We continued on, sweeping the seemingly endless rolling fields of sand for the missing Sandcrawler, until the last of the days' light had faded away. Although our instruments could continue picking up signals, we were exhausted beyond reading them. We set down at the base of a rocky outcropping along the edge of the Dune Sea, near the Jundland Wastes.

The livestock was offloaded and tethered to the side of the ship, left to graze on large bales of food brought from the cargo area. Temperatures were beginning to drop without the warmth of the suns overhead, so we took several of the compressed food bales and set them afire just outside the rear of the ship. The first shift guard was in place, scanning the area with his thermal imaging so the rest of us could get some sleep. We gathered around the blaze and settled in for the night.

Danz propped himself up on one elbow, the firelight throwing flickering light and shadow across his armor as he looked over to Blade, "So what was that all about back up on the *Devastator*? Who was that up on the gantry?" We all turned to face Blade, curious to hear.

Etz asked, "What are you talking about?"

Danz sat up fully, "Back up on the *Devastator*, just as we were about to leave, I was strapped in near the rear hatch and Blade here was boarding. He was talking to Deckard and 4120 when I saw him look up to a dark figure on an overhead access gantry. Whoever it was raised a hand, then turned and disappeared into the shadows as we lifted off. So who was it, Blade?"

Ddraig looked over at Taka, who looked over to Falker and Rogue, then they all turned toward Blade. He stared silently into the fire for a few moments then drew in a breath and began his story, "I'm a third generation soldier. I am very proud of our service history and have worked hard to live up to my family's expectations. My father's position has been both a blessing and a curse for me though. He always wanted me to stand in his footsteps one day on the bridge of a cruiser but I just never considered myself Navy material. My determination to not let family ties influence my path as a soldier has, in some regard, been my undoing."

1265 paced back and forth, scanning the darkened dunes, blaster drawn and at the ready but kept an ear open as we all listened closely to Blade over the sound of the wind. "My goal from as far back as I can remember was to join the Imperial Guard. My thoughts take me back to when, as a boy, I visited my father on his ship. On that rare occasion I remember standing in fear and awe as special visitors came aboard. I caught only glimpses of the dignitaries with their long red-robbed protectors with the gleaming, faceless red helmets. I could feel their intimidating glares and stern disposition, even from beneath their expressionless armor. Only the best, the toughest, most dedicated were permitted among their ranks. From that day on I knew my destiny, or so I thought." One of the Dewbacks groaned as he continued.

"Many early years of training and preparation yielded my placement near the top of my class coming out of the Academy. Two seasons later I was with a chosen few selected to continue my training with the Guard themselves. My father was proud even though I know in his heart he had

wanted a different outcome for me. For several months members of my squad had butted heads with one of the other trainees who had been installed as our squad leader and superior. He was the son of a well-known politician. His position in guard training had been maneuvered and bought. The father was well-known for his unscrupulous tactics for pushing agendas through the Senate. My father had served with him, and knew the full extent of his corruption."

Blade looked around the fire into our eyes as we listened. Some eyes were on him, some on the fire, some off into the stars.

"My father knew him well. They had clashed many times, and as time progressed, my father advanced, whereas the politician-to-be eventually wound up a little further down in the ranks. There was an altercation one night with several women in a local club, and the other man was dismissed from service. He wasted no time moving into politics, using his contacts, blackmailing anyone and everyone he had information on to move himself ahead. On numerous occasions the others in the unit, and I myself, had similar problems with his son. We had to correct him on matters of procedure and protocol and continually pick up his slack both physically and mentally.

My father warned me to watch him, and he was right. Our training group decided it would be a solid testimony to us all if we made it through under his leadership, or lack thereof. Eventually he would fall by the wayside. We just had to keep training and following his commands, but doing it faster and better than he could. He let it go with everyone but me."

0600 slid his pack off and sat down on an empty equipment crate near the entry ramp and spit into the darkness. The flames of the fire flickered in the light breeze as Blade continued.

"He was on me constantly, riding me harder and harder right up until our last furlough. It was just before our sequestered training began, separated from the general populace on Carida. It was late in the evening, and I had been finishing up a squad report, that he was supposed to have filed, before I headed out. The group was out for a night of drinking before our strict regimen of clean body, clean mind became a way of life. Most of my squadmates had been drinking for hours and were halfway down the row of pubs in the bottom by the time I arrived. Our "*superior*" had apparently enjoyed one too many and was busy spouting off at the mouth about me when I arrived.

I moved to the bar, ignoring him. I stood there with quiet rage, drinking my drink as he belligerently berated me and mocked my exemplary performance. I would not let him get the better of me, not this close, not now. I was determined to keep it together. I successfully kept my anger in check until my family's loyalty to the Empire was questioned. I didn't make a move, or strike out at him; I just wryly smiled back at him as I took another sip of my drink. My apparent amusement enraged him. He wanted so badly for me to hit him and start something. The drink had gotten the better of his senses and he finally swung his drink container at me, shattering it against my head. There was a brief scuffle in the back of the tavern in which I gave him the beating he had long deserved. Somewhere along the way he tripped in his drunken stupor and fell backward into the bar, snapping his neck just below the base of his skull. My fate and future was sealed before his lifeless body hit the floor."

There was a moment's silence as he paused, trying to think of how best to proceed, "It's hard to explain how it feels to have everything you have worked so hard to accomplish just vanish . . . gone in an instant. I was eventually acquitted based on the testimony of my squad mates and the other bar patrons. It was clearly self-defense, but all my life I had wanted one thing. I had spent years preparing my mind and body. I was so close to what I wanted and it would never happen. I thought surely the Guard would want someone who stood up for their beliefs, especially when defending the reputation of the Empire, but I guess the death of his son was more than the twisted politician would allow. I'm certain he used his influence to make sure the door to the Guard was closed to me forever.

After the publicity of the trial dies down, my father asked that I not contact him unless I was in danger. Although his request was not in anger, we haven't spoken in almost ten standard years. We don't really have to though. He knows what the fight was about, and he's proud of me, but he also knows that if anyone ever thought he was using his influence on my behalf, it could be taken the wrong way by the wrong people. Distance was best.

I was assigned to desert training on Dantooine, but with the decreasing demand for that specialty, I was moved again and cross-trained as an AT-ST pilot. While working my way up to AT-AT Commander, I was strangely and quickly reassigned. In the middle of the night I was unceremoniously awakened, and told to leave everything behind. A cloaked figure escorted me to a remote hangar telling me that my belongings would follow shortly.

Papers had been prepared and orders processed for my transfer back into a Stormtrooper position. I found myself strapping on my armor once again, shipping out to a remote building site to oversee and protect a group of structural engineers and an encampment of Wookiee slaves working on a "top clearance only" project.

It was later that season that I earned my call sign. Two slaves broke their shackles and in seconds had overpowered three troopers, killing the first two. It's amazing how fast those big creatures can move when they're motivated. The smaller one grabbed my XO but received a head shot from one of my squadmates for his trouble. The other lunged for me but I literally cut him in half with blasts from my -15. The boss called me *Blade* after that and the name stuck. It was the first time I had lost friends in combat. Unfortunately, it would not be the last."

With the engineers work on the outpost nearly completed I was awakened once again in the middle of the night and told to leave at once. It was the cloaked figure as before. My room had been emptied while I slept and my things already loaded for the abrupt reassignment. This time the destination was the SSD *Devastator*. There I would catch a shuttle to my new unit and pick up extra gear for the next assignment. Our long final approach was extended due to the seizure of a hostile ship in the main hangar bay.

Various craft circled to other access points on the massive vessel. Small flashes of light illuminated from beneath the Destroyer, but our holding pattern kept us from a direct view of the incident. Our shuttle was finally cleared to approach a small service bay under the bridge. As we touched down, various personnel went about their tasks, business as usual. Whatever was taking

place on the other side of the ship was literally of no consequence here.

I worked my way through the endless maze of halls and corridors down through the core of the Destroyer to a central turbolift cluster. After a long descent, the lift doors finally parted to a flurry of activity in a small sub bay where I was to catch another shuttle for the next leg of my journey. There were quite a few Stormtroopers moving at the double quick. A deck hand told me my original flight had been cancelled, but directed me to your ship. I walked over and spoke briefly to a couple of you on the ramp as we were loading up. It was then that I caught sight of the shadowy figure on the gantry, and got the strangest feeling of recognition. I was convinced it had to have been my father.

I know he asked me not to contact him out of concern for me, and I'm sure he has been the one quietly moving me around over the years based on inside intelligence as the situation required. I just wish he could reassign me publicly based on my record. The fact that my new group was full of veterans was a relief. Half of you guys were asleep by the time the engines fired up.

In my minds' eye, I watched as my father, the hangar bay and the *Devastator* were left behind as we fell away, making that long, stomach-dropping arc toward Tatooine."

He took a moment to catch his breath, looking into the licking flames of the fire. "I'm finding it hard letting go of my training. In the Guard, the closer you come to the inner circle of power, the less you are allowed to trust. You're trained to watch everyone, even each other. It's different out here. Being a trooper in the field, your unit is all you have. You have to depend on each other. That's the way it should be. Just bear in mind, and know that it's nothing personal, but until I'm more comfortable, I'm watching each of you closely. We all must have reasons why we were assigned here. It certainly isn't the best post in the Empire."

We all glanced warily around the fire at each other. None of us really knew all of the others, but we would need to rely on each other to make this work. Rogue walked away to check in with Captain Tyrell and his men to let them know of our progress. The rest of us settled a bit more for the night. I wiped the fine, sandy dust from the lenses of my bucket as I sat on the edge of the ramp. As I finished and lay back on the inclined metal plank, I rubbed my head and stared up into the massive expanse of stars looming overhead. Somewhere up there was the *Devastator*, and Lord Vader, awaiting the recovery of the stolen data recordings. I closed my eyes and almost immediately drifted off to sleep.

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Across the darkened dunes, far away from our small, fire lit encampment in the modest dwelling of an aging knight; after 20 years buried under several layers of personal belongings in a small chest, the lightsaber that had been used to slay Jedi in the final hours of the Temple's grandeur, to slaughter younglings and masters alike with no mercy; this elegant weapon lay poised, ready to return once again to the hand of a Skywalker.

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The stillness of the morning air was almost deafening. I was still reclining on the metal boarding ramp of the Sentinel and had been watching the suns come up when Topolev sat up and rubbed his eyes. I knew we weren't far from the edges of several of the local moisture farms. We had flown over them on the trip out. I wondered if the other 'crawler had ventured in that far to peddle their 'droids to the local farmers? Rogue moved and sat up now as well, noticing a flashing message indicator on his comm link. He noted it was from Tyrell as he listened to the recording. "Damn. He's cutting my search team in half!"

"What is it?" said Falker.

"Tyrell had another shuttle dropped from the *Devastator* overnight. It looks like most of his team was recalled. The destroyer is returning to DS Station and they're going with it. He's going to intercept us this morning and pick up two of his men from our flight crew along with Taka, Danz, Blade, Ddraig and you to help him with his search efforts."

"I don't mind working for Tyrell for a while as long as we find the missing data. Just don't leave me with him. I don't think I could take the guy for long!" said Falker, and he slapped Rogue on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get moving."

"Right", said Rogue, understanding perfectly, "We have a lot of ground to cover, but I think we're close. I can feel it."

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The suns were climbing into the sky and the drop ship cruised along, as we searched for the remaining Jawa Sandcrawler. We were skirting the edges of the rocky Jundland Wastes when Tyrell's shuttle intercepted us. We slowed and landed as his ship circled and descended to the sand in front of us.

Rogue sent five of his troops and two of Tyrell's troops out of the Sentinel, double-timing it over to the extended ramp of the shuttle.

Tyrell's voice crackled in Rogue's headset, "We'll re-group back in Mos Eisley. Good hunting." He never exited his ship or showed his face. We watched as our troops disappeared up their boarding ramp and the shuttle climbed back into the sky, heading down one of the ravines into the Wastes.

Rogue exhaled under his bucket, "He's trouble."

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The ground below became dotted with moisture vaporators, spread out in every direction as far as the eye could see as we flew over several sprawling moisture farms. Finally, we came across the remnants of the signature tread trail of the lumbering, mechanical Jawa transport vehicle. After following the tracks for some time, we came over a rise and saw the Sandcrawler we had been searching for.

The pilot banked hard to the right, circling around to the front of the 'crawler and then coming around to hover beside it. The clanking treads of the large vehicle slowed and then stopped moving altogether, as the transport lurched to a halt, steam venting from various ports around the base. There were several moments of silence, then a side hatch opened and a ramp lowered to the ground. Several Jawas came cautiously wandering down the ramp through clouds of venting gases to the sand. Our pilot lowered the hovering Sentinel to the ground and opened the rear hatch. We all filed out and circled around to face the Jawas, leaving him at the controls of the ship.

0600 moved ahead of the rest of us and already had his helmet translator switched on as he approached the leader. He was speaking with him as 4120, Felth and I came walking up.

It was clear the Jawas were anxious as they conversed with us. The leader was scratching his head, appearing to be confused and nervous as he tried to remember the things 0600 was asking for.

"He says he thinks he remembers picking up two bipeds, one of them found out in the dunes, but they sold both just yesterday. One was sold to a moisture farmer and the other to a repair shop in Anchorhead. He's not sure which farm, but thinks it may have been the last one before the Dune Sea."

Tensions were running high. We had been looking for this missing droid now for two days, and Lord Vader was not patient or forgiving.

Felth spoke up, his own patience with the little creatures wearing thin, "We're most likely halfway back to Mos Eisley by now, that's a fair bit of backtracking. Is he sure he has it right, is he sure he isn't hiding something? Maybe we should take a look onboard the 'crawler" and he drew his blaster, pointing it toward the group gathered at the base of the ramp.

The little Jawa was not sure what to make of Felth's comment, or having the blaster pointed at his friends, and became agitated. Several other Jawas on the ramp began jabbering away.

Silently, a small portal in the hull of the Sandcrawler opened and a nozzle protruded past the protective metal armor plating. Topolev noticed the barrel pointing in our direction, and knocked Rogue out of the way, as the Jawas in the 'crawler opened fire on us!

Topolev and Rogue rolled out of the way as the bolt seared past, burning into the already hot sand. Felth swiveled and drew his E-11 Blaster as the little leader Jawa moved out of the line of

fire and ran. He took a shot at the little creature, missing. I turned and blasted the little creature off his feet as he ran away.

The Sandcrawler's guns blazed again several more times, as we dove for the sand and took precise aim, returning fire at the turrets and the tread drive mechanisms, blasting them in a shower of sparks, rendering the Crawler defenseless and undriveable. 4120 ran toward the 'crawler and up the main ramp, blasting several Jawas out of his way and hurling a handful of thermal detonators inside. He turned and ran back toward us, Jawas scurrying down the ramp of the vehicle, behind him. He dove for the sand as the devices erupted in a series of violent concussive blasts inside the hulking vehicle. Rogue had not seen him toss the detonators and was turning toward the crawler just as the explosions ripped it apart.

He was knocked off his feet as the whole structure blew outward, armored metal panels hurtling off the vehicle. They flew out and rained down into the sand of the desert around us as the superheated gases and the concussion of the detonator thrust the massive armor plates outward with deadly force, killing anything within the blast radius. I stood up and turned to see the damage, just as our pilot lifted the Sentinel ship from its gear and fired into the command deck of the Crawler.

We were all firing on the fleeing Jawas now, avoiding their blaster fire and taking them out one by one. Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. The hovering Sentinel settled back into the sand once more. The wisping wind carried the unmistakable, nostril burning stench of charred Jawa flesh as we moved in close to the burned out vehicle. Our rifles were now slung on our shoulders and E-11's drawn for close combat. Etz and 0600 led the way up the ramp into the colossal structure. 4120 and I followed up the ramp as Felth, Topolev, Rogue and 1265 set up a perimeter around the base of the 'crawler, watching all sides for any possible approaching onlookers attracted by the smoking ruin.

It was dark inside. Smoke drifted through the small corridors, and the remnants of dead Jawas were everywhere. We stepped over them and moved higher into the vehicle, making our way around the sites where the detonators had done their damage. Footing was not good, as most of the ramp had been blown away. The bulkhead alongside it had been pierced, exposing the main cargo bay. Several of the detonators had gone off inside and it was now a tangle of metal, droid parts and smoke.

I kicked the dome from a red R5 unit out of the way as we moved still higher to the Command deck and the steering room. Here we saw the damage from the Sentinel's blasts. The hull had been breached by the green burst of energy from our ships' guns. Anything in the path had been vaporized. Black, acrid smoke billowed out of sparking, burning electronics and swirled out the gaping holes in the hull into the desert wind. We all began to search for transfer documents showing any recent sales. A wounded Jawa clawed at 4120's leg, Etz blasted it once in the head to end its misery.

0600 pulled the lifeless bodies of two dead Jawas off a small console and was sifting through some of the documents that had been spread out beneath them as he looked for evidence of the droid sale. There were records showing two sales today so far. One for a machinist droid to the

Toshi Station in Anchorhead, and one prior to that, to a moisture farmer, the last farm out before the Dune Sea. The paperwork showed a transfer of 2 droids, a protocol droid and an astromech. He grabbed the paperwork and turned to make his way out of the burning structure, "I've got what we need. Let's take a closer look outside."

The smoke had cleared somewhat and we could now see the bodies of Jawas littering the sand around the base of the 'crawler.

Rogue flipped on his commlink and contacted Captain Tyrell, asking that he check out the machinist 'droid sold to the Tosche Station in Anchorhead, while we doubled back to the moisture farm. The winds were picking up as we walked back to the drop ship. 4120 and I were discussing how to leave the scene, when 0600 and Topolev walked over discussing the sales documents.

I turned to him, "We were just talking about this scene, and how we should leave it. If the locals see Imperials slaughtering Jawas, they're going to know something is up and start asking a lot of questions; questions we don't need, and won't be allowed to answer. If we're going to be stationed here, we need to camouflage this scene; lead the trail away from us." The others nodded in agreement. 0600 turned toward the group, "Etz, untether the Bantha. She just became very important to the mission."

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An old woman stepped out of a small building to cross the street, when she stopped herself, and checked both directions carefully, then continued cautiously across the street. Anchorhead was relatively quiet this morning; no damned kids screaming by in their speeders, skyhoppers or swoops.

Catching sight of a small group of Imperial Stormtroopers making their way toward her, she hurried across the street into the building there, and closed the door, watching them nervously as they passed by. Falker had already made a sweep of the perimeter of the buildings at a small repair shop further down the street known as Tosche Station. When he was confident of the number of occupants and their positions, he silently waved to Tyrell and the others to advance to his position. They assembled near him and then fanned out, taking up positions around the station.

Windy laughed, taking his pool shot as Deak watched. "Can you believe Skywalker? First I catch him out in their techdome listening to an Academy recruitment tape while checking out applicant information packets, and then he comes blasting in here yesterday all charged up about a battle over Tatooine, what a joke. Nobody would ever fight for this place. I doubt anyone even knows we still exist way out here."

"Yeah, Wormie's got a big imagination, alright", said Deak, "he's spent too much time in the hot suns fixing 'vaporators. Hey, did he come by for those power converters Fixer set aside for him?"



If he doesn't, I want them. You got the last pair."

Deak and Windy were arguing over who got the last set of power converters as they played their game and Camie was curled up sleeping in the chair behind Fixer's parts-piled desk when the abrupt invasion occurred. Tyrell burst through the front door of Tosche Station with his blaster drawn as Taka, Danz and Ddraig flooded in after him, herding the startled three young kids to the center of the room.

Falker and Blade escorted a young mechanic in from the maintenance bay in the next room. His sleeves were rolled up and his arms dirtied with grime and vehicle lubricants from the speeder he was working on.

Tyrell spoke, "Now that we have your attention, we will search your building. Laze Loneozner, did you recently purchase a new droid?"

Fixer was shaken, scared and confused as he answered, but tried his best to look calm in front of Camie and the others, "Call me Fixer, everybody calls me . . ."

Tyrell slammed a fist down on the desk, "I don't give a damn about who you are! What about the 'droid?"

A shaking Fixer replied, "Yes, yes I did, I did! I mean we did. I mean, Merle did. Merle Tosche. He owns the place. He told me to get a new machinist 'droid, but he paid for it. I bought it from a Jawa Sandcrawler that came through here yesterday. What does that have to do with anything, though? I've bought and sold a lot of droids, and never had the Empire care about it."

Tyrell gave a small nod. Falker grabbed and folded Fixer's arm high up behind his back, slamming Loneozner's head down on the desk, spare parts clanging to the floor. Fixer winced in pain, Camie recoiled a step, covering her mouth, her face betraying her feelings for him. Tyrell stepped closer and removed his helmet leaning down a bit, sweat dripping from his nose, "Show us the respect we deserve and cooperate . . .", he was speaking just over Fixer's head as his gaze lifted and came to rest on Camie, ". . . or we will leave your repair station in smoking ruins and take all that is precious to you." Camie, shaking, took a cautious step back as Tyrell's eyes looked her up and down, but Ddraig was there with a blaster in her back to keep her from escaping.

"Take the girl and the others outside, but leave Loneozner here", barked Tyrell, "I want this place turned upside down. NOW!"

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0600, Rogue and a disappointed Topolev moved around the scene of the Sandcrawler and dropped several of the Gaffi sticks he had collected in random locations amongst the twisted metal plates and scattered 'droid parts, "I'm keeping one of them!", said Topolev, holding on to

the last gaffi. Meanwhile Etz rode the Bantha past the Crawler several times . . . leaving several side-by-side rows of tracks in the sand to give the appearance of many Tusks riding past.

He continued this exercise until the ground appeared trampled by many of the lumbering beasts moving in a herd. Then he walked her back up the ramp of the Sentinel and slipped off her back, snapping her restraints back into the large ring in the floor. The area now had the look of a confrontation between the Tusks and the Jawas.

We should be able to successfully avoid any of the local moisture farmers raising questions, and by taking the purchase orders, we had effectively eliminated any evidence of the droids' existence here.

Taking a last look around the site, we retreated up the ramp of the drop ship and lifted skyward. The pilot moved away slightly, then rotated back and fired several shots, scorching the ground where our landing gear had settled, leaving no traces of our presence behind. We banked away from the smoking ruin heading off toward the edge of the Dune Sea, and a moisture farm owned by someone named . . . Lars.

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