

## Chapter 12 – Sifting for Clues

A murky fog hung heavy over the still waters below, as the *Outrider* coasted silently along on repulsors, scanning the waters along the edge of the enormous lake on Dathomir. There were pieces of debris half submerged here in the shallows . . . from battles long over. The wreckage of several snubships of various origin could be seen just below the glassy surface, and the still, silent head of an All Terrain Armored Transport broke the surface, thrust upward like a metallic beast struggling for air, forever frozen in time. Rendar had heard of the savage battles here, and from the widespread abundance of twisted remnants, he could tell it was one that raged for some time. As the fog thinned under the heat of the emerging sun, the faint outline of a huge sail barge was visible in the distance.

He maneuvered his ship over to it, silently sliding past, taking note of its excellent condition. Very little, if any, damage was visible from the outside. Either her crew had been killed, or it had been accidentally set adrift during the battle. Regardless of how she came to be here in this ship graveyard, Rendar knew he could sell her easily on the open market. The retractable awnings and masts on the upper decks would have to be stowed in a swept-back position for transporting, he thought as his brain raced with the possibilities. He tried desperately to think of someone that owed him a favor . . . someone with a transport large enough to contain her.

There was a filthy-rich, Hutt crime lord back on Tatooine that would pay generously for such a high-profile display of wealth . . . possibly even generously enough for him to finally purchase a second ship. As he contemplated going onboard to look for salvageable cargo, his scanner began blipping . . . reminding him of the current reason he was here . . . there was a gathering of large lifeforms just ahead on the shore of the lake. The *Outrider* silently pulled away from the barge as Rendar keyed the position into his 'nav computer . . . he would be back. As for this current trip, if all went well with the capture, he would be on his way back to Tatooine soon . . . with his quarry. A high-pitched chorus of cries rose from the shoreline . . . the gathering of beasts had made a kill and was fighting over the steaming carcass. Rendar cinched his chest armor down tightly, checked his holstered blaster, and energized the powerful stun rifle leaning against his instrument panel . . . he had to capture a young one . . . and it had to be alive.

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I later came to discover that this inner city portion of Mos Eisley was known as “Pirate City”. This area surrounding the spaceport had earned the nickname by playing host to pirates, smugglers, ships and guns for hire and those who sought out their less-than-reputable services. And as relaxed as the patrons of Chalmun’s Cantina were, they definitely sat up and took notice a bit when five Sandtroopers entered and spilled down the steps into the noise and smoke of the cool, murky chamber. The pulsing beat of the music slowed a bit, but quickly recovered as Dan and the Nodes kept the music playing . . . watching us slip in amongst the crowd. Ddraig stood by the ‘droid detector, covering the front door, I worked my way quickly around to the back of the room to cover the rear exit and Etz stepped up to the bar to ask Wuher about our two marks. Topolev and Falker stepped into the thick of the crowd, watching the faces of those around them as Wuher spoke to Etz. The Hammerhead, Nadon, was easily found, seated in the corner booth, sipping on a drink, and they moved in closer to his table, watching him.

Etz moved away from the bar, and as he made his way past Falker and Topolev . . . he indicated a human in a flight suit seated at a card game near the back of the room. The three of them moved toward me . . . Etz motioned to his eye lenses and then to Nadon for Ddraig to keep an eye on the Ithorian. Falker stepped up to the game table, “BoShek?” The dark-haired human looked up from his cards, the smoke from his cigar drifting about his head. Etz and Topolev flanked Falker as the Rodian and the two other humans at the table laid down their cards, grabbed their credits and left BoShek alone with us. The remaining human exhaled deeply, slowly laid his cards down and grabbed the thick cigar near his lips, pulling it away from his mouth. He spit out a small bit of the leafy cigar, “Look, I’ve been over this and over this . . . the ship has been re-registered in my name, there’s no reason to think . . .” Falker cut him off, “This isn’t about your ship. We need answers about someone you know, and we need them now. We can discuss your business here, or you can come with us outside for a little more privacy.” The pilot nodded slowly, looking around, “OK, let’s step outside then . . . I’ll need to work after this is over.”

I saw Etz, Falker and Topolev step back as BoShek stood up from the table. He gathered his credits and surrendered his thigh-holstered blaster to Falker as the four walked past me out the front door. I stepped over closer to Ddraig to move on Nadon. Ddraig positioned himself to one side of the booth . . . I stepped up to the other. “Mamow Nadon?” I asked. The tired eyes atop the twin eye stalks blinked twice as he looked up from his drink and fixed his sight on us. “Yes?” came the stereo response from his dual mouths. Ddraig continued “We need information about someone you have known over the years.” The aging Ithorian sat upright, speaking slowly with calculated clarity, “Oh? I do hope this person hasn’t gone and done something foolish . . . who is it you are inquiring about?” I looked over at Ddraig and then responded “We need to know about Ben Kenobi, the hermit that lives in the hills . . . out in the wastes.”

Mamow Nadon stiffened slightly. Kenobi had warned him that this day would come, that it was just a matter of time. The Ithorian had seen his friend looking for passage off-world with the young boy, Luke. Ben had told him “When and if I leave the planet, it will be with the boy. Once I am gone, should anyone come asking about me, save yourself and tell them anything they want to know. By the time they ask, it will be too late for your information to be of any assistance to them.”

Nadon took a sip of his drink, “Ben Kenobi . . . Ben Kenobi. I can tell you about him, but let’s go out to the street . . . there are far too many ears in here.”

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The Outrider now sat silently camouflaged in the lush, dense foliage near the water’s edge. Rendar exited his ship and moved stealthily along the shore, parting the tall grasses, advancing on the feeding herd ahead. There were approximately nine of the beasts, with the largest of the males and females ripping the kill to pieces, devouring their meal and throwing the occasional small piece to the gathering of young ones several meters away.

Rendar was close enough now to watch them . . . closer than he cared to be, but he needed this proximity to single out the best choice for capture. There were three youngsters watching their elders, but two of them had pushed a smaller one to the back of their group, leaving him relatively unattended. Rendar lowered his rifle and peered through the scope, taking aim on the small one in the rear of the pack . . . then he waited. He listened to the grunting and snarling as the group fed. One of the larger males swiped at another, growling and howling loudly . . . the sound echoing off the water. As it did, render fired a full-power stun beam at the smallest of them. The blue rings slapped it in the back and it dropped to the ground. The others continued eating, not noticing the fact that the youngest lay unconscious on the ground.

Dash reached into a pouch on his belt and withdrew a small capsule. He moved as close as he dared to the rear of the herd and silently hurled the capsule into the foliage beyond them. There was a small flash of light, followed by billowing smoke. As the herd looked up from its' meal to address the smoke, he lifted the four foot "baby" Rancor off the ground, and draping it over his shoulders, turned and ran toward his ship. He was almost to it when one of the older, 10-meter tall males caught sight of him running and let out a horrific howl, and crashed off through the underbrush after the stolen youngster, followed by the rest of the herd. They tore through the muddy vines and grasses quickly closing the distance between their meal and Rendar.

Dash raced through the muddy terrain and foliage, vines ripping at his face and arms as he ran for his life. The dead weight of the unconscious Rancor over his shoulder slowed him down immensely. His foot hit the bottom of the Outrider's ramp and he glanced back over his shoulder . . . the herd was gaining rapidly. The interior hatch slammed down and the ramp lifted as he flung the rancor off his shoulder and ran for the cockpit, dropping his rifle. The engines lay waiting on standby until he slammed a control lever forward, raising them to full power as he jumped into his seat. One hand instinctively found the throttle, the other a directional stick. The engines fired as the repulsors pushed hard against the muddy ground. The landing gear feet pulled clear of the thick mud, retracting as the ship rose into the air . . . he heard the horrible scraping sound of the huge claws of his pursuers squealing across the lower hull as it ripped toward the sky. His breaths were deep and his heart pounding as the Outrider streaked away from Dathomir.

The 'nav computer beeped confirmation as he entered the coordinates for Tatooine. With a safe course plotted, he gently pulled back on the twin center-throttle controls, initiating the hyperspace jump. The dim starlight outside his cockpit window streaked into long, stretched starlines as the Outrider was flung out of the Quelii sector to lightspeed. As his body adjusted to the increased speed, he stood up and went back to the hold to secure his latest delivery. "Easy money" he muttered to himself, grinning as he snapped the stun collar around the neck of the Rancor.

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Wailing Tatooine winds whipped across the open expanse of desert as an early-afternoon sandstorm advanced rapidly across the flats.

4120 lowered the shuttle to the ground near the domed entry to the underground Lars homestead as the front edge of the storm swept over the ship and engulfed the farm. The small band of troops descended the ramp into the swirling wind and churning, stinging bite of the sand. They were barely able to make out the shapes of several local people braving the wind and flying sand of the storm to move two large bundles down into the shelter of the underground dwelling . . . their loose desert clothing flapping wildly in the strong gusts. Our troops crossed the distance to the relative protection of the entryway. Danz, bucket off, had sprinted ahead and was hurrying everyone out of the storm and to follow us down into the homestead. When the last one was out of the gusting sandstorm, he stepped down the stairs into the darkness below. The stone steps had been placed by hand when the dwelling was built . . . sharp edges had worn smooth over the years, and there was now a slight depression in the center of each stone of the heavily-traveled corridor.

Felth led the small band, emptying out into a small alcove at the base of the steps. The thermal imaging in their helmets had activated in the dim light. The others they had seen had gone ahead a bit and were waiting in the corridor ahead. 0600, Rogue, 4120 and Blade followed Felth into the corridor with Danz bringing up the rear. Felth had his E-11 drawn and leveled at the others in the corridor as Rogue stepped forward “What’s you’re business here?”

The man in the front of the group pulled his goggles up into his dark hair, “I might ask you the same . . . I’m Huff Darklighter . . . I own several neighboring farms that share borders with this one. Several of my farmhands were out repairing ‘vaporator units yesterday and reported seeing smoke over this way. They rode over in their speeder to check things out and made a gruesome discovery. The owners, Owen and Beru Lars had been savagely murdered, and the farm had been left in ruins . . . burning. I just heard about it this morning when I returned from a business trip in Mos Espa.”

The second man in the group stepped up, removing his goggles . . . he was younger, also with dark hair “I’m betting you did this . . . the timing fits perfectly with when we were questioned at the power station”, indicating the others behind him. The young woman next to him now raised her goggles and pulled his arm, holding him back “Fixer, don’t.”

“We were here . . .” said Rogue “and we spoke to the Lars’ about the same missing droid you were questioned about. Owen said he had sent the two ‘droids he’d just bought to Mos Espa for refurbishing and memory wipes. It was when we started asking about their nephew, Luke, that they both became defensive. Mrs. Lars . . . Beru, held us at bay with a thermal detonator, and inadvertently vaporized herself and Owen when she . . . dropped it.” It was only partly the truth, but the gist of the chain of events was accurate.

The younger man edged forward, held back again by Camie, “You expect us to buy that?” Rogue turned to him. Moving closer “I don’t care if you buy it or not. I don’t answer to you and I certainly don’t owe you any explanation beyond that where sensitive Imperial business is concerned . . . got it?” Fixer stared back as another young voice spoke up behind Camie “So where’s Wormie?” Rogue leaned his head to one side to see past Fixer, “You mean Luke?” “Yeah . . . no one’s seen him since a couple of days ago when he came blasting into the station

bragging about seeing . . . a battle beyond the atmosphere.” said Windy, realizing that Luke had been right. “Yeah” echoed Deak.

“That’s actually why we’re here” said Rogue, “we’re looking for more information about Luke and the hermit of the wastes . . . Ben Kenobi.” All faces went blank as a silence fell over the group . . . then Deak spoke up “I knew that old freak would crack up one day and do something like this.” Huff Darklighter rolled his eyes “You don’t know that he . . .” but Deak continued “I overheard my parents talking to the Lars about him once . . . he came here several times over the years, asking about Luke . . . bringing him gifts, how creepy is that?. Owen didn’t like him much, and finally ordered him to stay away from the farm and Luke. Beru seemed to always feel sorry for him.” The wind howled outside, spraying sand down the steps behind them.

4120 stepped up a bit closer “What have you got there in your bundles?” nodding toward the darkness of the floor. Huff leaned closer, “That’s what’s left of Owen and Beru. We were about to bury them when the sandstorm kicked up. We’ll finish when it passes. These small storms don’t last long . . . not like the Teeth of Tatooine.”

All the troopers turned to the older moisture farmer, “The Teeth of Tatooine?” asked Danz. Darklighter nodded, “That’s right. There are several deserts that make up the Dune Sea. Most of Tatooine is uninhabited by humans, only Sandpeople and some Jawas venture much beyond the edges of the settlements outside Anchorhead, Mos Espa and Mos Eisley. Not far out from here in the Dune Sea is a transitional area where two of these deserts meet. One is on a higher plateau than the other, and when the afternoon comes, the changing temperatures and air pressures cause the cooling air of the higher desert to shift and rush down into the lower plateau in a blinding daily sandstorm that hurls sharp rock shards along the sloping region, shredding anything left out in the open . . . hence the name, The Teeth of Tatooine.”

0600 tapped Rogue on the shoulder, “We should get started with why we came . . . to see if we can find anything left behind that might help. The techdome and the power generator are total losses . . . the oils and fuels out there made for a pretty intense fire, but the hydroponic growing rooms down below us, and the living quarters may still be somewhat intact .

Rogue nodded in agreement, motioning for the others to follow, “You civilians wait here. When the storm passes, bury your dead and be on your way, this homestead is part of our investigation and off limits until further notice” as he eyed Fixer “off limits” and headed off down the hallway. The others followed him down the hall until he stopped and turned around, “We’re going to need to dig in from here” gesturing to a collapsed portion of the tunnel. “Luckily, 0600 and I have a bit of experience with that.” He pulled off his bucket, grinning “. . . right?” He turned and began clearing out some of the larger stone pieces, shoving them back to be moved out of the way. “It looks like just pieces of the tunnel frame casing . . . the sand here is packed almost as tight as rock.” 0600 pulled off his bucket and set to work as the others did the same and moved in to help.

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The slow-moving Ithorian moved a few feet further into the alley . . . off the main street and away from anyone who might have wanted to overhear. He leaned against the back wall of the Mos Eisley cantina, feeling the vibrations from the music inside in his bones. “Ben Kenobi, huh” he sighed deeply, silently gathering his thoughts, and silently apologizing to his friend, whom he still felt he was betraying, regardless of what he had been told. I met Ben Kenobi almost 20 years ago now, right here in this bar” he said, running his long fingers across the wall behind him with a bit of an unfocused, far away look in his eyes as he recalled the past.

“The day had been long, full of intricate experiments with my Bafforr trees and I was in for a drink to help me relax and re-focus . . . .”

*“You ever do anything except mess around with those plants?” asked Wuher. “You ever do anything except mess around with those drinks?” replied Nadon, sardonically, tipping up his glass. Wuher snorted . . . “Touché . . . but mark my words, one day I’ll find the perfect blend, that perfect drink that Jabba won’t be able to resist, and he’ll bring me out to work at the palace as his personal bartender. I’m a young man, I’ve got time to figure out what he likes, and when I do, I’ll be out of this place. What’s so interesting about those plants anyway?” he said as he continued mixing and concocting the next drink. Nadon tasted his own drink as he formulated his response, “These trees are special . . . they are aware . . . they have a living awareness, not just a shadow in the Force, but a presence in it all their own.”*

*Wuher laughed, “You a mystic too . . . or a Jedi? I could use the money I’d earn by turning you in” he laughed. “Nadon laughed as well, “No, my friend, I’m hardly Jedi material, although I have had no problems feeling the Force, sometimes stronger than others.” Nadon didn’t notice the cloaked young man further down the bar taking a sudden interest in their conversation. The music streamed across the open room and smoke hung thick in the air tonight. Wuher was busy keeping up with the drink orders for the heavy crowd.*

*“I paid a pretty credit for each of my trees, and have been experimenting with their Force-presence and the effects of Ysalimiri on them and the Force around them.” Wuher had stopped mixing the drink and was staring blankly with a dense expression on his face. The conversation had definitely taken a turn, moving it far above his comprehension level. Nadon smiled a small smile, “It’s not terribly important work, but it keeps me interested, busy . . . and out of trouble.” He raised his cup and downed the last of his liquid intoxicant. “Thank you for the drink . . . but I must be on my way.”*

*As he stood up from the bar, Wuher absently waved once with a free hand . . . he was mixing yet another new drink . . . another step on his quest. As the Ithorian ascended the steps to the front door, the cloaked patron further down the bar lay several credits down, threw back the rest of his drink and made his way toward the door as the dark-goggled Kubaz at the table in front of the band turned to watch him go.*

*Nadon was on the darkened, empty street making his way toward his speeder when a second, human bar patron stepped out into the cool evening air. As the Ithorian climbed into the speeder, the human drew nearer, “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but overhear about your interest in Bafforr trees and Ysalimiri.” Nadon turned his head ‘round trying to make out the face of the*

*cloaked figure in the pale moonlight. The human sensed his uneasiness and reached up, pulling back his hood, revealing a gentle face, "Hello there. Don't be afraid, I mean you no harm . . . I swear. I'm interested in your discussion with our bartender friend. It's been a while since I've been in the presence of a Bafforr tree, and was curious about your findings . . . with the Ysalimiri. I've heard rumors, but do they really generate an area where the Force cannot exist?"*

*Nadon leaned a little closer, "I feel you in the Force, my new friend, quite strongly . . . in the past I felt others with the same presence as you . . . another lifetime ago, before the madness. Yes . . . if I recall correctly . . . they do have Bafforr trees in the gardens of the Jedi Temple . . . don't they?" Kenobi straightened up a bit, hand moving to the side of his belt. "Don't worry, friend" said the Ithorian, looking around the dark streets, "I am as much a refugee as you are. I pose no threat to you . . . and have no interests in revealing your presence here . . . I promise. Would you like to see them . . . and judge for yourself about the Ysalimiri?"*

*After a brief moment of silence as Nadon's words sunk in fully, "Absolutely" came Kenobi's response. The arborist motioned for the Jedi outcast to join him in the speeder, "We don't receive many visitors, the trees and I . . . in fact . . . you are the first." Kenobi's face broke into a smile as he climbed into the passenger compartment and Nadon pulled away into the darkness heading for his home. "You said you were a refugee also. What happened to you to make you seek refuge here?" The speeder glided along as Nadon relayed the details of his life as a High Priest and highly esteemed arborist, and his banishment as they disappeared into the night heading toward his small dwelling nestled in the foothills on the outskirts of Mos Eisley.*

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It burned cold now, like fire-ice in his veins, racing through him, pulsing with his heartbeat, warming . . . and chilling him at the same time. There could be no doubt that his old master was near . . . and had been concealed onboard the **Millenium Falcon** when she was dragged onboard. Vader remained silent as Tarkin's meeting closed and his top consultants left the room.

He watched as the last one . . . senior Imperial Commander in charge of operations, Admiral Motti stepped silently into the corridor outside. He was an arrogant peddler of the technological might and ultimate battle superiority that this new Death Star would bring to the Empire . . . Vader detested him. "I should have strangled him when I had the opportunity" escaped his lips and was faithfully reproduced by the synthetic voice enhancers in his helmet. Tarkin swiveled his chair slightly, staring coldly as the door to the corridor slid shut. "He's one of my top men for a reason . . ." the vein in his forehead protruding as he spoke, "he understands the necessary show of power it will take to keep the local systems . . ."

"He is an imbecile" Vader interrupted, ". . . a child in an adult's arena . . . but we have more important matters that have surfaced." Tarkin stood, his brow furrowing, "What matters?"

Vader paused momentarily, "I reviewed the helmet recording from the trooper on Tatooine. I saw a disturbing image on it . . . one which I have been replaying over and over . . . seeking clarity and not reaching any. With the capture of the Millenium Falcon, I have come to discover that my first impressions from the images are true. My former master is alive, and . . . he is here."

"Obi-Wan Kenobi? What makes you think so?" scoffed Tarkin, standing up from his chair. Vader responded matter-of-factly to him "A tremor in the Force. The last time I felt it, was in the presence of my old master." Images of the violent eruptions on Mustafar and the searing pain of the lightsaber wounds dissolved as Tarkin replied. "Surely he must be dead by now." Vader turned to him "Don't underestimate the Force."

"The Jedi are extinct . . . their fire has gone out of the universe. You, my friend are all that's left of their religion." As he finished his sentence, the comm on the table sounded. He keyed it on, "Yes?" The voice on the line replied, "Governor Tarkin, we have an emergency alert in detention block AA-23." The significance of the number sunk in as he keyed the comm again, "The princess?"

Put all sections on the alert.”

Vader took a step closer, “Obi-Wan is here. The Force is with him.” Tarkin glared at his dark friend, “If you’re right, he must not be allowed to escape.” Vader knew better what lay ahead . . . the inescapable destiny that had been set in motion when Obi-Wan had foolishly left him for dead, “Escape is not his plan. I must face him . . . alone.”

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Several annoyed Dewbacks shifted around, fighting for space in the small, pungent pen adjacent to the entrance to the Cantina as BoShek paced back and forth, carefully watching where he stepped. “How many times do I need to tell you the same thing? I knew of him, and flew him in a few things over the years, but I didn’t know him. I didn’t drink with him, we never played cards together . . . he was a job . . . nothing more. He had specific requests and paid on time. He came in yesterday looking for Chewbacca . . . the Wookiee from Solo’s ship, the Falcon, and a fast flight out. I couldn’t help him out with the flight . . . I have a job that was already loading up and takes me out outta here tomorrow. I had seen Chewie in the back with Solo just before the old guy came in, so I motioned for him to join us at the bar. I moved down to let them have room to talk, and I finished my drink. I didn’t hear any part of their conversation while they were at the bar, it was too noisy.

Then, the kid that was with him must have upset old Doc Evazon and his Aqualish friend. They were about to extend the number of death sentences on their heads from twelve to thirteen when Kenobi pulls out a lightsaber and slices Evazon in two and peels off the Aqualish’s arm. Who uses those things anymore? I moved around to the other side of the scene to get a better look.

Doc had eluded many a bounty hunter, and old Ben had dispatched him without breaking a sweat. After he switched off the lightsaber and helped the boy up off the floor, he introduced the kid to Chewie, and they walked past me on their way to see Solo. Now, my Wookiee’s not that good . . . I couldn’t make out what Chewie’s part was, but as they walked by I heard Kenobi say *‘He is still alive, but that is all I can say, my friend.’* And that’s all I know about yesterday, I swear.”

“You said you shipped in various things over the years . . .” said Topolev, “What types of things?” Falker and Etz turned their gaze to the pilot as he rocked his head back, staring up into the sky in thought. Falker pushed one of the Dewbacks away, as it had wandered a little too close. “I’m thinking . . . it’s been a long time, guys, and it was only an order or two. If I remember correctly, on one of the orders he said he wanted some security sentries because he lived alone . . . yeah, now I remember . . . the order was for six or seven seeker remotes with shock and stun settings only, no kill. I was only able to find ones with all three, but he said he could disable the kill function himself. I think there was an order for cable and cable fastening hardware, some tools, other miscellaneous things . . . nothing real exotic or questionable.”

“He had been seen with Mamow Nadon, the Ithorian from the bar, over the years . . . do you know anything about him?” asked Etz. He thought a second . . . “Nadon . . . I’ve had a few jobs for him too over the years, as well as some of the parts suppliers in Mos Eisley and Mos Espa, Jabba, the B’Omarr monks . . . anybody willing to pay. The Hammerhead paid me to ship in trees, flowers and herbs. He really likes his plants . . . and a few small animals over the years

too. I know he's into plants, but why he would want plants in a place like this is beyond me . . . too much work. Go somewhere green and lush and live there . . . much easier."

Falker spoke up, "What animals did he want?" "Little, fuzzy lizard-things . . . I picked them up from a trader in the markets on Corellia. I think he called them Ysalimanders or something like that . . . said he got them on Myrkr, just off the Perlemian Trade Route . . . you know, in the Colonies . . . near Tenaab."

Topolev glanced over to Falker and Etz . . . then turned back to BoShek, "Where's your current job taking you? We may need to speak to you again." "Bespín. I'm hauling out some mining machinery that was salvaged from the far side of Tatooine near the pit." Topolev looked puzzled, "The pit? I thought this planet was only inhabited in the areas around here?"

BoShek grinned, "Well, it is . . . now. Back when the Empire was busy coring out this rock, there was a huge facility on the far side that did the mining and shipping of the ore offworld, so as not to disrupt the locals. Check it out next time you're heading out, the far side has a huge coring entry point . . . this place is essentially a dead planet . . . a lot of Tatooine's core has been cut away. Don't worry, I'll be back after I make the delivery. This is just the first of several runs I'm making. One of the Bespín mining operations is having all kinds of supply problems and labor issues. Any automation I can supply, they're willing to pay quite well for. I'll be back gentlemen. I have nothing to hide . . . this time" he laughed.

Etz looked over to Topolev and he nodded, "OK, you're free to go. If we need you, we'll find you." The detainee slipped out of the gate and headed back into the bar as Topolev leaned over to Falker, "What do you think Kenobi meant by *He's still alive*? Who?" One of the Dewbacks groaned. "Let's attach a homing beacon to his ship just to be sure we know where he is." Falker nodded and stepped out of the pen, glancing toward the Cantina door, then headed toward the spaceport.

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Nadon shook his large head as he looked off beyond us, "Has it really been that long? I guess it has . . . where have the years gone." I pressed him a bit, raising my blaster somewhat, "So, Kenobi was a fugitive Jedi and you did nothing to identify him or turn him over to the local authorities all these years?" He coughed a bit, then responded, "After we went to my home and he saw the trees and Ysalimiri, the gentle person I had seen in the street was gone. He ignited his lightsaber, held it to my neck and told me that he wouldn't hesitate to kill me if I ever revealed his secret, or failed to help him with trees and other supplies he needed. He said I'd never see it coming."

Watching our body language closely, Nadon made certain that his lie had been believed. He and Obi-Wan shared no love for the Empire, and he had certainly never been threatened by the ousted protector of peace and justice for the Old Republic. Ddraig urged him to continue, "Tell us more about old Ben."

The Hammerhead drew in a long breath, letting it out evenly and slowly as he remembered the events of the past . . . carefully adjusting them ever so slightly . . . making Kenobi out as a

dangerous threat. "I took him to my home and when we stepped inside he was amazed at the work I had been able to accomplish in such a barren place as this . . . ."

*"Incredible." said Obi-Wan, "You must have several dozen trees growing in here!" The Ithorian smiled "Four and a half dozen to be exact." Kenobi walked further back into the room, surrounded by the Bafforr trees, he breathed in deeply, closing his eyes, smelling the richness of the bark and leaves, the very small, pure presence of the Bafforr, stirring the Force . . . for a brief instant it felt as if he were in the safety and beauty of the gardens of the Temple. He missed his home, the only one he remembered having . . . he missed his many friends, now dead. The collective cries of their voices rose to an overwhelming roar in his ears.*

*He opened his eyes and pushed the screams further back into the calm of the Force. Memories, he thought. He knew that his friends were no longer screaming, they were one with the energy of the Force now . . . the screams were echoed memories, screams of anguish and betrayal . . . betrayal by the Jedi that was his padawaan . . . the padawaan that was his responsibility to raise and train and teach. He had failed so miserably with Anakin, and now the galaxy had been made to bear the burden of his failure. The weight of the responsibility bore down on him constantly, gnawing at him like a hungry animal.*

*"Are you all right?" asked Nadon. Ben nodded.*

*Nadon raised his head, looking up into the branches, "These Ysalimiri, when spaced with even, relative proximity, not only shroud themselves and the trees from the Force, they also create an area surrounding themselves that is a deadened zone, where the Force is not disturbed . . . effectively concealing a meditating Jedi from unwanted detection. You are more than welcome to come and meditate here in my home whenever you like. I understand your need to do so without making any ripples in the Force, giving your presence away."*

*Kenobi smiled as he glanced around at the trees, "I imagine keeping all these plants watered must cost quite a bit." Nadon coughed a bit more, as he nodded his head, "I feel like I own a small portion of **Darklighter Water**." They both smiled. Then Ben stepped closer to his new friend "If I were able to secure a way for you to water your plants without paying, would you grow me several trees and breed Ysalimiri for each?" The Ithorian blinked several times at the offer, "You have a way to do such a thing?" he asked. "The moisture farmers around here own all of the evaporative units."*

*Kenobi nodded his head "I do. When I first arrived here, I was given two broken down 'vaporators by an acquaintance who owns a local farm. I have repaired and restored one to working order, which provides more than enough water for my needs. I can do the same for the second, and bring it to you in exchange for the trees and Ysalimiri." Nadon breathed in deeply as he contemplated the offer . . . and Ben continued. "I have a need for an area in which the Force can be used, without its use being felt or perceived in the slightest outside the perimeter of the trees . . . that is of the utmost importance. How many trees and Ysalimiri would afford me a space the size of . . . say, twice the space of Chalmun's?"*

*The high priest from Ithoria calculated the space in his head, “A dozen should work nicely . . .” he said smiling, “I’ll get to work on them right away.”*

*Kenobi smiled and twisted a bit of his beard alongside his chin as he began making mental notes for supplies he would need. He only had a short amount of time before the training must begin. That had been the problem with Anakin from the beginning . . .his age . . . and too many attachments. He was determined to not repeat his mistakes with Luke . . . there was far too much at stake.*

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