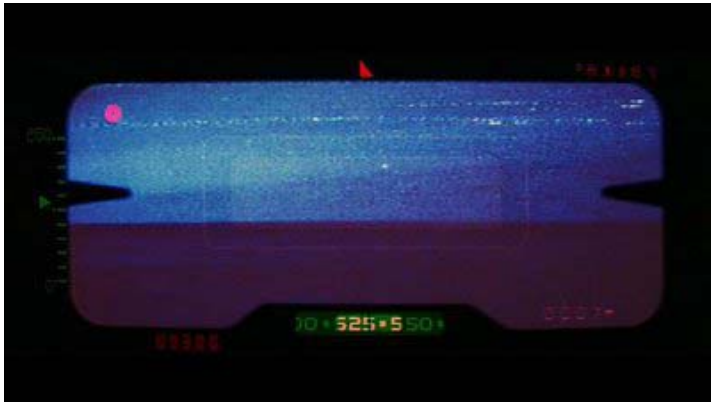


Chapter 9

The sand, rock and windswept dunes making up the barren landscape beneath us slid past quickly as we now flew with a purpose toward one of the moisture farms we had passed earlier this



morning. Hopefully the 'droid or 'droids would soon be in our custody, the stolen data extracted and returned to Lord Vader and the 'droid or 'droids destroyed. I unclipped my macros from my



belt and snapped them on, scanning the horizon for any sign of the moisture farm . . . nothing yet.

I found myself wondering what could be so important to have rattled Lord Vader so, and why he had been careless enough to allow the data to be stolen by Rebels in the first place.

* * *

The small domed entrance to the Lars' dwelling finally came into view and the Sentinel flew in low, giving us a good visual scan of the farm and its' buildings. The main living quarters and most of the other



The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol

structures were built beneath ground . . . with only their roofs protruding up to break the flat, sandy skyline.

All of the buildings appeared to have subterranean corridors that emptied into a common, open-



air courtyard. The Dewbacks groaned and flipped their tails as the Sentinel settled to the ground, squarely in the center of the now-familiar mechanical tracks that had kicked up the sand in front of the dwelling. The rear doors hissed open, and the gusting, fresh air rushed in to replace the overwhelming stench from the onboard livestock. We walked the length of the rear ramp to the ground outside and circled around toward the domed entrance to the desert homestead.

A scruffy, aging male dressed in desert wraps came walking out to meet us. Etz and Topolev

walked to the edge of the pit and peered down into the open courtyard below . . . the man's eyes

followed them as they walked. Felth hung back a bit with 1265, carefully watching the rest of the farm . . . 4120, 0600 and I stood with Rogue, who walked up to the man as he verified the name on the purchase order, **"Mr. Owen Lars?"**



"Thats right", Owen nodded.

"We have information that tells us you purchased two 'droids yesterday from a Jawa Sandcrawler, is that correct?" The man squinted a bit, crossing his arms, not trusting the sudden gathering of Imperial troops on his farm, **"Maybe . . . but . . . why the hell would the**

Empire care if I buy a couple of 'droids . . . what's bringing you out this far, this early to question me about buying a 'droid or two?"

Rogue took a step closer to the moisture farmer, "**I'll ask the questions.**" Owen narrowed his eyes even more as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end . . . he had always thought it would come to something like this one day. He had watched over his step-brother's child for all these years, knowing in the back of his mind that one day, the Empire that had claimed Anakin would be back to claim his son as well. The fact that Kenobi had remained on Tatooine in hiding, carefully watching over the boy from a distance had long foreshadowed this day and the events that were now beginning to unfold.

Luckily, Luke had gotten an early start with both new 'droids on an errand and would then be off to repair condensers on the South ridge . . . and not returning for some time. Owen now feared for himself and his wife as he settled back a bit. He had sheltered and protected his "nephew" from the Empire and crazy Ben Kenobi for too many years to have it all unravel now because of a 'droid searching for the old wizard.

He wished Kenobi and his master, Qui Gon Jinn, had never come to this place. Anakin would have grown up with his mother, slaves to Watto, far away from the treachery that became the Empire . . . the treachery and deception that had twisted him into the cold darkness he now was. Owen's mind was reeling with the chain of events stemming from that fated emergency landing, and the explosive, destructive wave that had swept across the galaxy as a result, now culminating in this meeting with Sandtroopers at his farm on this windy morning.

With any luck, Luke had already had the astromech's memory flush done. Owen spoke, "**Yeah . . . I bought two droids yesterday from those filthy, greedy little Jawas. They took my money and headed off in that direction**", he said pointing across the Jundland Wastes toward Anchorhead.



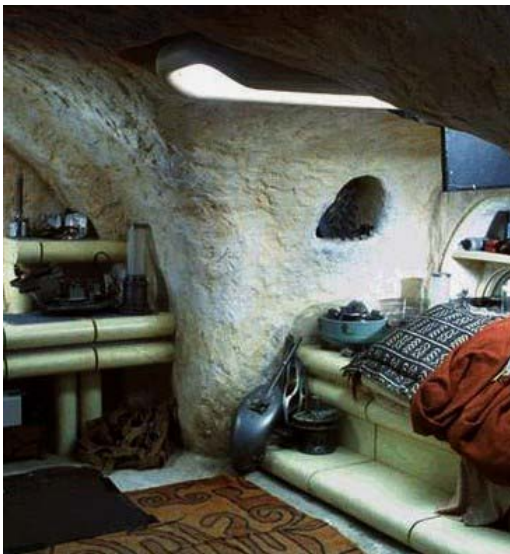
Rogue nodded in agreement as Owen finished speaking. "**I'm sure they did, but I need to see the 'droids you purchased. One of them may have something that was taken from us . . . and we want it back.**" Owen scowled,

"I don't know what you're looking for, dammit, but they aren't here . . . they've been taken to, uh . . . Mos Espa for some refurbishing. I paid good money for those blasted 'droids and they still needed work."

Rogue turned to 4120, **"Search the farm, we need to be sure they aren't here. You and 0600 check the power generator. Deckard . . . you, Etz and Topolev check the living quarters. 1265, search the surface structures."** Our XO nodded and motioned for the rest of us to follow him. **"I already told you they aren't here"**, said Owen, uncrossing his arms.



Rogue reflexively responded as did the rest of us, stepping back and leveling our blasters at the scruffily-bearded moisture farmer. He took a step back, slowly raising his hands. **"I have no weapons."** Rogue visually scanned the old man and nodded again . . . the rest of us backed off and walked toward the dome and the steps down into the home, **"We'll just wait here Mr. Lars, while we see what my troops turn up."** Owen felt control slipping away and a knot forming in his stomach as the armor-clad Sandtroopers descended the stairs into the homestead his father had built below.



1265 headed off to inspect the roofs and surface structures behind the courtyard pit. Etz and Topolev went in the direction of the living spaces in search of other family members, Etz followed a drifting smell from what must be a food preparation area, and I went toward the garage. Topolev uncovered a tidy, modest sleeping room for Mr. Lars and his wife, and a second, disheveled sleeping room, which showed signs of someone having been there the night prior, and having left in a hurry.

The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol

Etz stepped quietly through the hallways until he heard the churning of food processors and cookers. **"Luke, is that you? Did you forget something?"** came a voice from the next room. He stepped down a few steps and found an old woman preparing drinks for a morning meal.

She turned, expecting to see **Luke** in the doorway, and instead saw Etz, with his blaster lowered at her. She screamed and



dropped the container she held in her hand. The blue, milky liquid inside exploded all over her feet and the floor as it hit the ground . . . she stood shaking, terrified and transfixed by the sight of the Imperial Sandtrooper in her home. Etz spoke, **"Hold it right there. I don't want to hurt you . . . we just have a few questions for you and your husband. Who is . . . Luke?"**

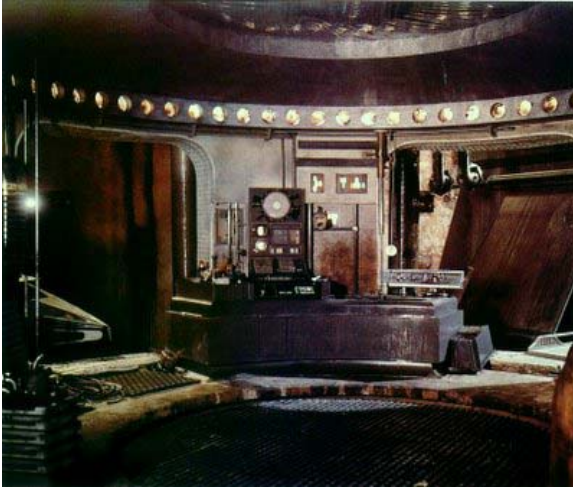
* * *

I descended a short flight of stairs and crossed a narrow, gridded gantry through a



dark garage area where it appeared several vehicles were stored. There was an empty, open bay with some tools and parts lying about, and then a second bay with a T-16 Skyhopper parked in it . . . hardly the norm for aging moisture farmers. I continued on and the gantry emptied out into a grungy, well-worn techdome . . . a repair center for condensers, vaporators and other farm machinery . . . including droids.

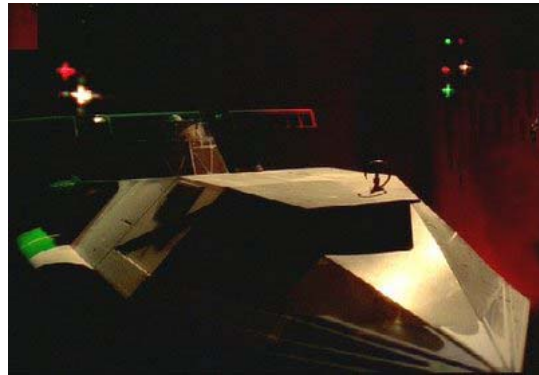
The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol



The room had the smell of heavy oils, burnt wiring and exhaust residue. I stepped down to the gridded center deckplate in the center of the stone room and slowly looked around.

Protruding from another parking bay adjacent to the oil bath facility was the nose of a multi-passenger, V-35 landspeeder . . . a bit more in line with our residents' age and driving needs.

I nosed around, looking over the repair benches as lights silently winked on and off on the wall control panels. The oil bath was calibrated to accommodate a plunge depth for a bi-pedal protocol 'droid. Then a hooked tool and a small, round lump of metal on one of the repair benches caught my eye . . . I removed my left



hand from under the muzzle of my blaster, and picked up the small object. It was a restraining bolt . . . the kind used to keep 'droids from wandering off. I looked around the room again and pulled off my bucket, holding the bolt close to my nose to smell it. There was a strong burnt odor and a loose black powdery residue, indicating it had been removed recently. I slipped my bucket back on and headed back toward the surface to show Rogue and the others what I had found.

* * *

I stepped off the top step and out of the domed doorway into the sand. 4120 stood beside Rogue and 0600 . . . Felth, Topolev and 1265 now formed a line between the small gathering and the Sentinel. Etz had found a woman and brought her out. She stood beside her husband, shivering from fear and the cool morning wind blowing over us. Rogue had his blaster trained on Lars and Etz had his blaster leveled at the small of the woman's back. I walked closer, rolling the restraining bolt over in my hand. I could hear Rogue speaking to them now, "**. . . so then, what you're telling me is that you did buy the 'droids, but they never even made it inside your place? You sent them right off to Mos Espa for refitting and refurbishment?**"

The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol

Owen nodded. Then Etz spoke up, **"Who is Luke? Your wife called out to Luke when I came walking in on her."** The moisture farmer looked flustered for a second, then recovered with his reply, **"Luke was a hired hand that we just lost a week or so ago. He worked on the vaporators . . . that's why I needed the droids . . . to fill his spot."** Etz was not convinced. **"The woman seemed to think he had forgotten something and had come back for it . . . doesn't sound like an ex-farm hand to me."**

The whole situation was beginning to just not smell right. I looked down at the restraining bolt in my hand and I spoke up to the group as Topolev stepped closer, **"I found this in their tech dome."** I tossed the bolt to 0600 who looked it over as I continued, **"it's been recently removed from a 'droid . . . and their oil bath was last calibrated for a bi-pedal protocol model."** Rogue turned to stare Owen in the eyes. 4120 and Topolev looked at each other as the latter spoke up, **"We didn't see any 'droids down there except a worn out old power droid and a broken Treadwell."**

Rogue spoke to Owen again, **"I'm going to ask you one last time . . . think carefully before you answer . . . who is Luke, and where are your 'droids?"** Owen looked back at Beru as she shook in fear, staring back at him. He turned thoughtfully back to Rogue, **"You've already decided to kill us haven't you? You can't have any witnesses to what you're searching for . . . we're too much of a liability . . . aren't we?"**



Beru remained silent . . . she knew they had to protect Luke, or everything they had worked for over the years would be for nothing. She lunged at the thermal detonator on Topolev's belt, unclipping it and activating it, holding it high in the air over her head. All of our blasters leveled at the old woman as Felth and 1265 stepped closer, blasters raised. She shook and trembled, as we backed away from her and the clicking detonator.

The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol

She and Owen backed away from us toward the domed entrance to their home. **"You can't have Luke, and you won't be killing any of us over a 'droid. It's . . . it's you who'll be dying today!"** And, as she moved to throw the detonator at us, 0600, 4120 and I blasted through her forearm at the wrist, severing it from her . . . the detonator released and dropped at their feet. Owen grabbed his wife as she screamed in pain, and they turned their backs to the device, as we ran for cover. The concussion of the blast knocked us all into the sand. When we stood and turned to face the grisly sight, there was little left of the moisture farmer and his wife.



The blast had wiped the flesh from their bones, as neatly as you might wipe dirt from your clothing. All that remained were two smoking skeletons lying beside the stairs. Whoever Luke was, he was definitely on his own now.



"Burn it . . . burn it all", said Rogue, **"I don't want any traces of our presence left here"** and he walked away, pulling off his bucket . . . pushing past us.

Felth and 1265 stood guard as Etz, Topolev, 4120, 0600 and I disappeared down the stairs to set the charges. A short time later we all made our way out of the lower levels and headed for the drop ship. Suddenly, the ground beneath our boots shook violently as the first of our charges

The Sandtrooper's Story : Origins of the 104th Moisture Farm Patrol

detonated. A large geyser of sand shot skyward over the farm as still more charges erupted beneath the surface. Smoke billowed from the open pit, the roof of the tech dome and other surface structures as the living quarters beneath were consumed in fire . . . our job here was finished.



* * *