

Chapter 10

Under the watchful eye of the moisture farmer, the group of young local pilots stood gathered at the canyon's rim far above us, peering through macrobinoculars at the wreckage and scattered debris field below, their baggy tunics flapping wildly in the late afternoon winds.

Rogue had instructed both the drop ship and the shuttle to be set down at the base of the Stone Needle, near the wreckage of the two airships. We had taken the transport and were slowly gliding over the scattered debris that was leading us back to the original point of impact. Topolev, Falker and I were watching off the tailboard and over the open sides for any signs of life as Blade piloted, slowly creeping along. The initial point of impact was several hundred meters behind the smoking remains of the ships, with a scattering of parts flung across the stony floor and high into the jagged cliff rocks.

Back at the ships, the fuel gel in the T-16s had long since burned away, and all that remained now was hot twisted metal . . . neither craft would ever fly again. Camie sat with the doctor on the ramp of the sentinel as we worked to get inside the tangled mess. "There's no pilot in this one!" shouted Etz as he and 0600 shoved aside a panel of metal. From the other ship came Danz' reply in a shout "Nobody in this one either, but the safety cage looks like it ejected before impact."

4120 and Ddraig walked away from Etz and began looking for the ejected cockpit portions. Felth and 1265 took the other side of the canyon. They spread out as they walked past the enormous vertical stone column in the center of the canyon floor known as the Stone Needle.

Ddraig looked up at its jagged sides as they walked past. From this low angle, he could only see a small bit of sky through the smooth, wind-carved slot in the center of the upper portion of the natural monolith. To his right, another canyon branched out and away from the huge stone obstruction. His thoughts flashed back to their stomach-churning drop from the Devastator and Lt. Tank's last minute roll into this canyon on their way to Mos Eisley.

Felth and 1265 were finding more small debris but nothing that resembled a cockpit when 4120 took off running a short distance over a small stony rise and down into the small rut beyond it, "I've got one of them!" Falker ran over to get a good look, "It's Loneozner. Looks like he's alive . . . for now."

A teary eyed Camie jumped up off the boarding ramp and ran to follow 4120, Rogue and the others, as Blade turned the transport around. The doctor caught up to Camie and grabbed her arm, holding her back. He spun her around to face him, "Let us check them first, we have no idea how bad things are in there. You may not want to see this." She tugged her arm away from him, but agreed to wait. He hurried ahead to where 4120 was, "Don't move him."

The doctor was looking over Fixer as Felth and 1265 continued their sweep on the other side of the canyon. As they circled around to come back to the first cage, 1265 noticed a small jutting overhang above them. He crossed over to the sentinel, up the ramp to the cargo area and opened a small panel, retrieving what looked like a blaster rifle. Felth watched as he walked back over to the overhang and pointed his blaster toward the stone wall above it and fired. The blaster in his hand shook as a coiled line was deployed behind a spiked hook.

As the sharp hook slammed into the stone wall, secondary durasteel anchors instantly deployed, digging into the rock. 1265 gripped the handle of the blaster tightly and squeezed the trigger a second time. The gun rapidly wound up the line, pulling him off his feet and up to the overhead stone shelf. Blackened, streaking scars ran along the stone wall and the second cage lay on its

side, crumpled against the canyon wall. "The second one's up here!" he yelled back down.

Camie looked over to 1265 and spoke softly almost to herself, "One? There should be two in there. Deak was riding with Windy in the other 'hopper."

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In the absolute still, frozen silence of space along the outer reaches of the Hydian Way near Ord Radama, a tiny speck of a ship approached and slipped beneath the superstructure of the immense Star Destroyer **Subverter**. As it approached the main hangar bay, its electronic identity signature was read by one of the flight techs sitting at a long console. He flipped off the indicator and read through the transmitted beacon information on the monitor before him.

He stood sharply, flinging his seat back as he leaned forward to look over the console, through the transparisteel pane into the bay below. The outside corner of his left eye began to twitch slightly. Down in the massive bay, amidst the racks of secured TIE Fighters and shuttles, he saw the unmistakable bent wings of a modified TIE fighter coupling with an overhead mooring.

He turned away and ran to the bulkhead comm at the end of his row and slapped his hand down on the transmit key as the other techs in the row twisted around to see what was happening, "Commander, Lord Vader has just docked in the main bay. I say again, Lord Vader is alive and has just docked in the main bay!"

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Ddraig adjusted the controls, bringing the repulsor sled even with the edge of the stone outcropping. Felth and Topolev stepped off the floating platform onto the ledge and moved closer to the cockpit cage to help 1265 get the pilot out. Camie screamed from below "There's only one?"

Ddraig looked down at her, "Yes, only one. Should there have been more?" The feisty, dark-haired girl on the canyon floor yelled back up to him, "Yes! Deak and Windy were riding together. Deak has black hair, Windy has brown. Which one do you have?" Ddraig turned around to look at the others pulling the pilot out of the cage. The unconscious kid had black hair. He turned back to her, "We have Deak. There's no sign of Windy."

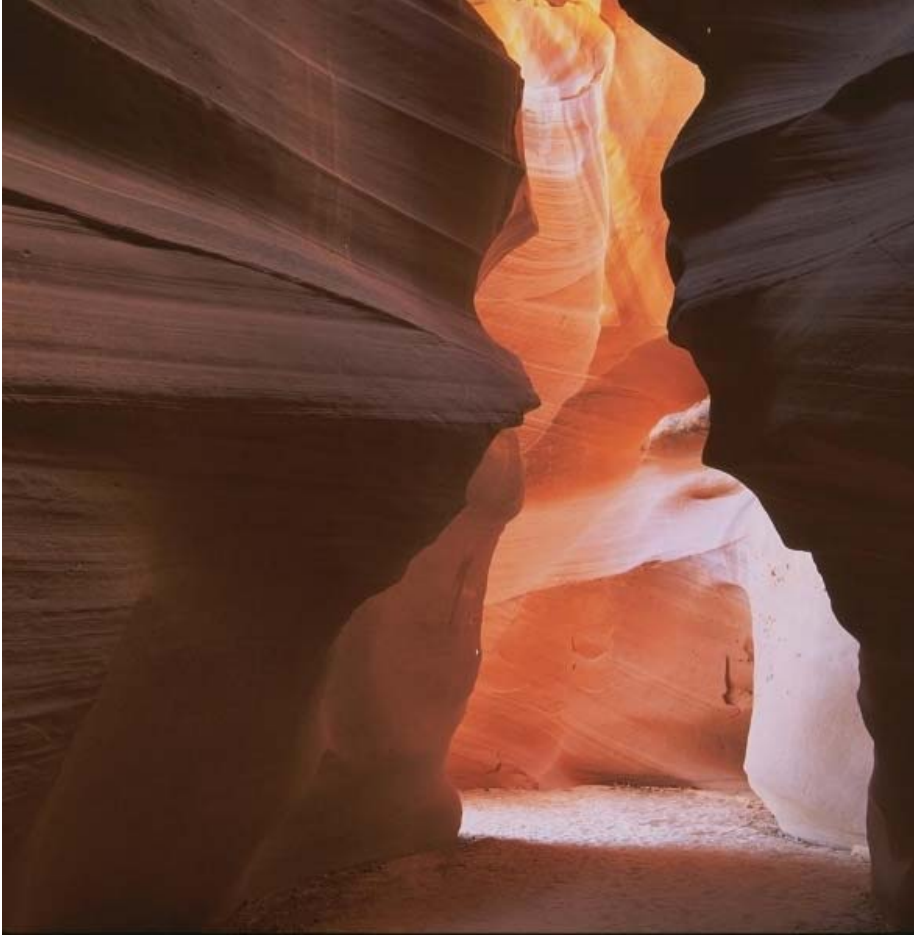
Felth helped 1265 lay Deak out on the flat rock. He was battered and cut up pretty severely, and one of his arms appeared broken, but he had a pulse and was breathing. As they checked him further, Topolev had turned and was following the curved top of the overhanging rock they were standing on. It disappeared around the corner into the side canyon they had taken on their first approach to Mos Eisley.

As he was rounding the corner, he heard faint grunting noises coming from the canyon ahead. As he cleared the stony corner, he saw a Tusken Raider, maybe forty meters away, securing Windy's unconscious body over the back of a Bantha saddle.

He reflexively pulled the E-11 from his holster, took aim at the creature, and fired. Through the reticle of his scope, he saw the creature turn suddenly, his blast striking it in the upper arm instead of the head. The howl of pain from the Raider roared down the canyon, echoing off the stone walls as it jumped into the saddle.



Topolev was taking aim for a second shot, and the other troopers were all running along the canyon floor to see what had happened when the startled young Bantha took off at a full gallop and disappeared into a deep, windcarved crevasse in the side of the canyon wall.



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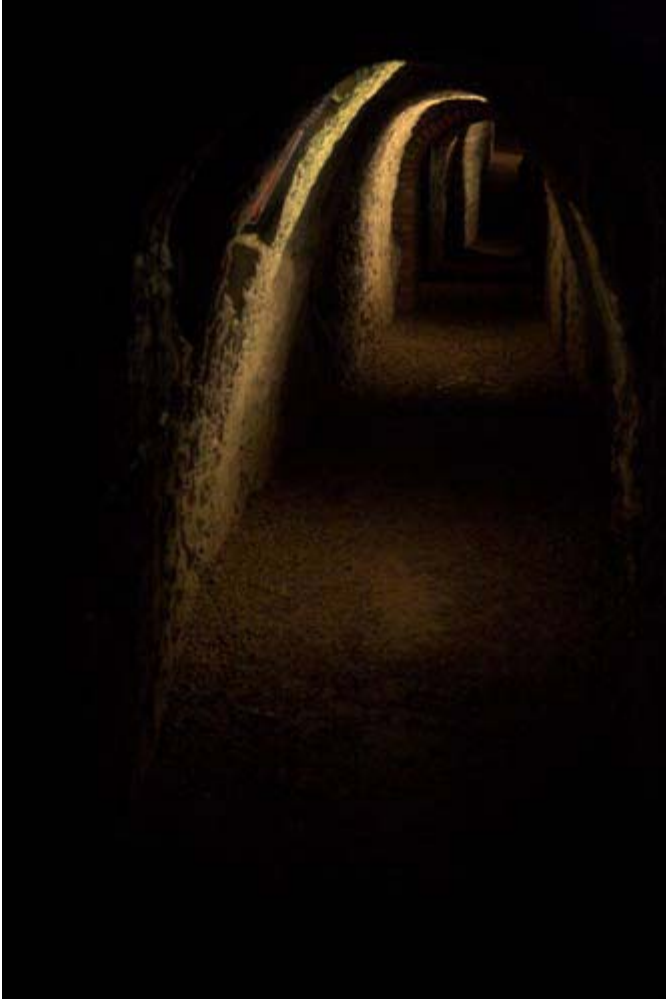
Rogue and the others were working the rescue operations, moving Fixer and Deak into the medical speeder for transport to Bestine and better medical care as Topolev, Blade, Etz and I ran, with blasters drawn, into the mouth of the narrow slot canyon. The fading sunlight of the afternoon seemed amplified here as the walls glowed an eerie orange. The twisting passageway snaked this way and that, further and further back into the cliff.



It continued to narrow and darken until finally, we came upon the Bantha, abandoned and left blocking the entrance to a cave that disappeared into the hillside itself. I grabbed the Bantha's reigns and moved it aside as the others headed into the darkness.

I let the braided leather strapping go and stepped inside the stone opening, remembering our last journey into one of Tatooine's caves. The heads up display in my helmet activated immediately, scanning in infrared. I was moving a bit slower now, as my eyes adjusted to the display, but I managed to catch up to the others, who were moving a bit more cautiously as well.

The cave walls became smoother and smoother the further in we went, and the grade of the floor began to angle down as well. The smooth, curving natural walls were now clearly a hand-crafted tunnel.



Light spilled from tiny airshafts into the dark hallway in regular intervals, momentarily rendering the infrared useless and nearly blinding us. We kept moving, advancing hopefully toward the Raider and the boy he had taken.

We could hear the Raider, up ahead somewhere in the darkness, running away from us with his unconscious prize, deeper into the hillside. Suddenly Topolev stopped, as our helmet displays suddenly snowed over and the images became scrambled. "Buckets off", he said, "Something in here's interfering with our gear." We all pulled our helmets off and continued on in the dark, running our hands along the smooth walls to find the way.

As we pressed on, the walls became uneven and bumpy. A light streamed into the tunnel ahead, fed by a large air shaft. As we moved closer to the lighted area, the source of the uneven walls became apparent.

The natural crevasse that led us into the cave and hand-carved tunnel had taken a turn for the grisly, as the "walls" were now made up of thousands and thousands of carefully stacked bones and skulls . . . placed in a tight, interlocking pattern. We all stopped to take in the scope of the dead that filled these chambers. Etz was the first to speak, "Where the hell are we?"



We were all stopped, staring at the stacks of leg bones and skulls. We had all seen and dealt our fair share of death, but none of us had ever seen the tedious, ritualistic placement and arrangement of bones into decorative patterns like this.

"I have no idea", I responded as I ran my hand over some of the carvings in the stone, "but we need to keep moving or that kid, Windy, will end up as part of the pile." I hurried off down the passageway calling over my shoulder, "We can find out more about this place later."

Etz took one last look before he turned to follow the rest of us.

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Felth and 1265 carefully moved Deak from the hovering repulsor sled onto the softer repulsor-gurney and into the right side of the waiting medical transport speeder. The doctor was working on Fixer along the opposite side as they slid him into the cramped space.

4120 and Camie watched from the ground outside as the doctor used water from the farmer's moisture collection tank to clean away dried blood from Loneozner's face, exposing the laceration. He opened a package of bacta gel and squeezed some of it across the opening, then prepared a bandage to cover it. As he secured the bandage, he shot a glance over at Deak. The young man's nose was angled sharply to the side, undoubtedly broken, as was his arm, "Not quite as cut up, but still not good. We're going to have to transport these two to Bestine as quickly as possible. If your other troops aren't back soon, you'll need to bring the other one along when they return."

4120 nodded and turned away from the med speeder as he activated his chin-switch, "Deckard, what's the update on your pursuit? Deckard?"

Rogue stepped over to him, "I've been trying to reach them too, they're not responding. I'm going up to the rim in the shuttle to disperse the crowd and load up the swoop bike. I'll be back for you shortly. Keep trying."

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As I was running along in the darkness with my hand trailing along the wall, I suddenly heard Etz and Blade fade away from behind me. Topolev and both stopped, retracing our steps as I yelled, "Etz!"

"Yeah, Deckard we're here. I think the tunnel forked", said Etz. We backtracked until we all came together again. "Etz and I must have been following the wall on the right side" said Blade.

"Yeah, I was following the one on the left", I replied. "Great. The tunnel branches off here."

I flicked on my E11 and peered down each of the hallways through the scope, now displaying in infrared mode, but saw nothing. "We're gonna have to split up. We have no idea which way the raider went." As I spoke, there was a crackling coming from the comm inside my helmet: "Csshshh . . . Deckard . . . Deckard, you there?"

I pulled my bucket on, hearing 4120 coming through the headset. I clicked the chin switch, "Deckard here. We're in pursuit of the Raider and the boy. Be advised there is a comm blackout area in these tunnels, you're coming through, but barely."

There was a moment's silence, then 4120's chopped signal again, Csshshh: "Falker and Felth will remain behind here for you with the Sentinel. Rogue, 0600, 1265 and I are heading to Darklighter Water. Ddraig and Danz will be escorting the doctor to Bestine. Find that boy."

I nodded imperceptibly in the dark, "We will. Deckard out." I pulled off my bucket, "Falker and Felth are waiting for us, the others are heading out. You two go that way, Topolev and I will head this way. Watch out for that raider, he obviously knows this place better than we do."

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He felt the silent, heavy energy of his Ghorfa ancestors pressing down on top of the already heavy weight of the unconscious human on his back as he ran through the sacred grounds. Beneath the pointed spikes thrusting out of his head wrappings, far inside the depths of his quasi-human brain, in a language understood by few outside his kind, his thoughts raced as he skillfully moved through the darkness.

He had been brought here before, many years ago by his elders and shown the destructive power of things outside the clan. Vivid memories of a frightened young child clinging to his grandfather's hand surfaced in his mind as he remembered seeing all those bones for the first time. The fearful images that the Shaman's stories of an ancient and unforgiving plague painted in his mind were as clear today as they had been then.



The story of the great fireball that fell to the surface, as with all of the Shaman's stories, had been told around the tribal fires. The warriors and elders had rushed to inspect it, finding large chunks of frozen water at the crater of the comet. They were quickly collected and taken away as gifts from the gods. The ice melted, yielding large amounts of water, which was celebrated and consumed with the belief that it would yield mystical powers by any who drank of it. In reality, the revered water of the gods had carried deadly microbes from the far reaches of space. The numbers of the dead grew so rapidly that the bodies could not be disposed of fast enough.

Further spreading of the plague to those who had not drunk the water, compromising the last hope for continuing their race, was feared. Those that had drunk from the infected water that were lucky enough to have been immune to the ravages of the plague suffered an alternately gruesome fate, becoming the "keepers of the dead".

Those poor souls had the job of removing traditional wraps and moving the naked, rotting corpses of their friends to the area of the "great sands" (the Teeth of Tatooine) to be stripped of their flesh. When the grisly task was complete, and only the bones remained, they were moved to these caves and reverently stacked and placed with great care and artistry. This simultaneously removed the unclean from the tribes and created a monument to their immense suffering.

He stopped to adjust the weight of the human across his shoulders and heard others coming down the passageway behind. Others had hunted Bantha or desert Wraids to be the victim of their bloodrite torturing. He would be revered as a mighty hunter if he could successfully evade his pursuers and torture the captured human, extending the suffering and agony for as many

weeks as possible before death.

Once that was completed, he would have only the largest and final task. To hunt and slay a Krayt Dragon, and retrieve a stone from its stomach. He gripped Windy's forearm and ankle as he ran, pretending it was the shaft of the gaderffii that would be bestowed upon him by the High Urr'Ak once he passed these tests and became an adult hunter.

On his left he passed a dark tunnel opening and then an air shaft above, spilling light. He turned his head momentarily to the side to look into one of the two chambers of elders. The bones here were arranged in circular patterns, one in each chamber, to honor the suns Tatoo I and Tatoo II.



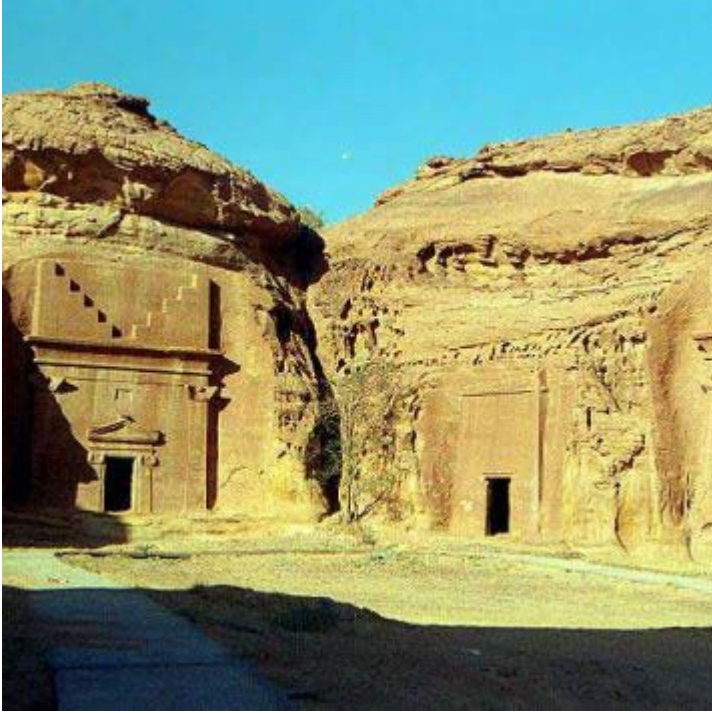
The darkened steps, the end of the nightmarish detour through these sacred grounds, were now just ahead as he had remembered.



He raced up them into the warmth of the fading afternoon sunlight, running out across the courtyard of the Kumumgah.



This was the oldest known ruin on Tatooine. It had been crafted by the hands of the original Tatooine inhabitants, and had been preserved from the destructive sands by the canyon walls which surrounded it.



Ancient stories suggested that both the Ghorfa and the Jawas descended from the Kumungah, but no one knew with any certainty.

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Blade nearly ran into Topolev and me as the two twisting passageways we had both been following separately finally rejoined. There was light here, streaming into two bone chambers, one on either side of the tunnel. In the light emanating from these rooms, we were barely able to see the only way out of these passages . . . stone stairs on the far wall.

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The Tusken was almost across the courtyard to the crevasse in the wall on the far side which led out to the next canyon, when multiple crimson bolts from Imperial blasters pierced his back and exploded through his chest, spraying his blood ahead into the sand where he now stumbled and fell. Windy was thrown forward, rolling off the raider's shoulders and away from his struggling captor.

The four of us ran across the stony courtyard, blasters at the ready, and moved in to check the body. The ragged breathing through the screened mouth stopped and the shuddering body went limp as the last of his life and blood drained away. Topolev and Blade were scanning the stony cliffs above while Etz moved in to check Windy, "He's alive. Get Falker and Felth here so we can transport this kid to Bestine."

I was already on the comm.

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The ***Subverter*** emerged from the vortex of hyperspace deep in the Tapani sector. Several robotic convoy ships, travelling the final leg of the Shapani Bypass at sub-light speeds, lumbered along toward the core systems, their cryogenically frozen crews unaware that the Star Destroyer had appeared behind them. The destroyer followed a course heading that took them past Mrissi on final approach to the orbital shipyards above Fondor. Lord Vader was anxious to reach the platform and oversee the final construction stages of his personal Super Star Destroyer, the ***Executor***.

Deep within the ***Subverter***, in a dark, private conference room, the Dark Lord of the Sith was kneeling, speaking with his holographic mentor, "Yes master, that is correct, I am approaching the Fondor shipyard. The ***Executor*** will soon be ready, giving us time to coordinate the ground forces, bomber squads and other TIE air support to move in on the rebel's base before they evacuate their personnel."



"Excellent", replied the Emperor, "The whole of the Yavin system has been under constant surveillance to ensure that the rebels do not escape us. I sense that your intention is to lead the retaliatory attack against the rebels on the Yavin moon."

"Yes, master. I will personally deliver our response to the destruction of the Death Star from the bridge of my new ship."

The hologram of the Emperor paused momentarily, reflecting on the conversation, "It would appear that you have things well under control there. Proceed with your plan, Lord Vader."

Vader bowed his helmeted head, "As you wish."



The flickering bluish image of the Emperor continued to stare down at him, "Was there something else you wanted to tell me, Lord Vader? I sense something weighing on your thoughts."

Vader considered his response carefully. He had purposely kept the thoughts and emotions concerning his son buried deep down, "No, master. Only thoughts of the task at hand."

"Very well."



As the image of the Emperor flickered away, Vader rose from his knees, revealing a breath-taking scene out his viewport. Fondor shimmered with brilliant blue oceans and swirled white clouds. The shipyards were situated in orbit far above the planet, and construction crews were hard at work on his enormous new vessel.

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