

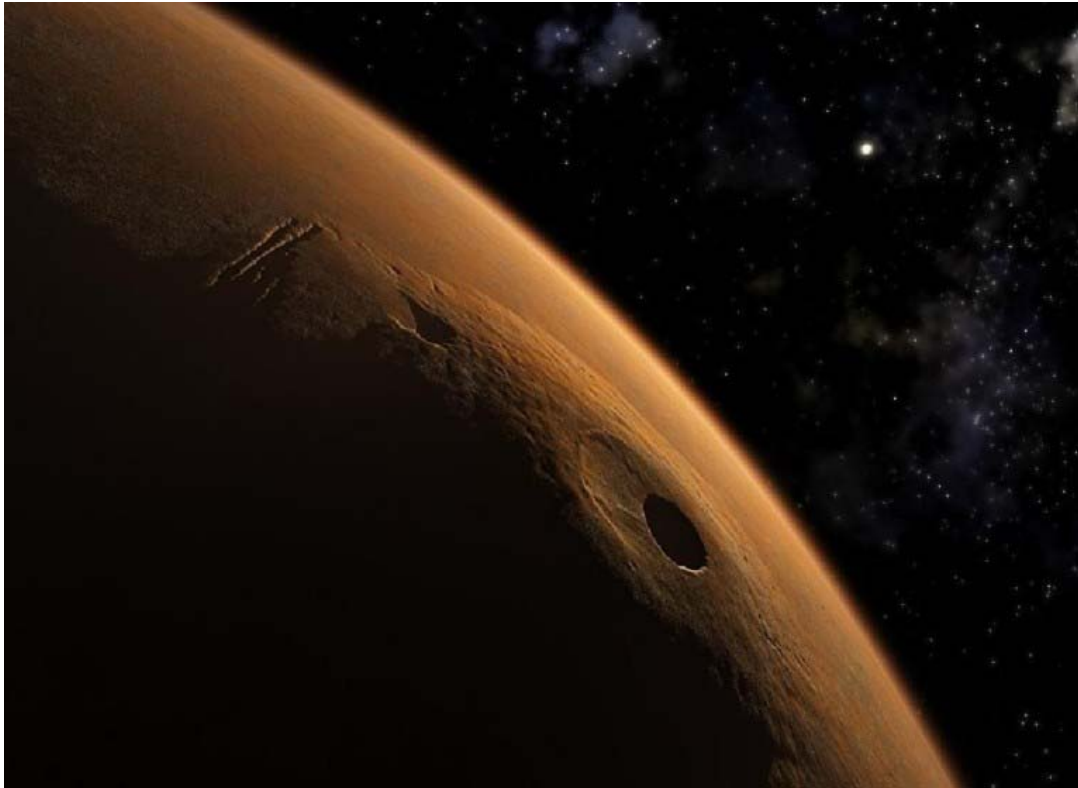
Chapter 12

The slight rattle of the air currents across the wide wings subsided as the shuttle passed out of the atmosphere into orbit. BoShek was seated in the navigator's seat beside 0600, who was piloting. The blue-purple of the late afternoon sky transitioned to the black of space as they continued to ascend.

He wondered to himself what these troops were looking for and how they thought he might be able to help. He was tired. His eyelids closed over burning eyes. Not only did he deliver the parts to Bespin, but he was asked by the mine administrator to install the parts into another unit he had delivered some time before. His arms ached, his head hurt, he was hungry and had planned for a much better use of his time at a Sabacc table in Chalmun's.

Now far beneath them, the surface of Tatooine slipped by as the shuttle accelerated toward the far side. 0600 turned to him, "Let me know when you think we're close to the location." The images of food, drinks and Sabacc evaporated as he opened his eyes, "I don't think you're going to need me to find it. I know Rogue was upset that I didn't know the exact coordinates, but I never use them. Anyone could find this place from up here."

He watched as the rocky Jundland Wastes disappeared beyond the horizon and the surface grew dark. They flew on over the darkness until he spoke again, "You should be able to see it soon. It's not precisely on the exact opposite side." His voice trailed off as the shadowy recess became visible like a huge stain on the surface below.



0600 switched his comm, "Rogue, we have a visual. This thing is bigger than we thought." As he released the comm, he leaned forward to get a better view over the instrument cluster as BoShek commented, "The pit itself is gargantuan. The base of operations that I think you might be looking for is a complex on the Western side. See that depressed ring around the crater?"

0600 nodded. "That's where the fools undercut too far and the overhanging rock began to collapse. It's very unstable. Most of the equipment I salvage is found way down in the bowels of that hole. I can't get loaded and get out fast enough." 0600 nodded his agreement as he pushed forward on the controls beginning their descent, "I can understand why."

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Nadon slouched in the navigator's chair beside me, staring at the instrument panel before us for any indication of a match for my vaporator motor signature. So far, there had been no such indication. He stretched his leg out and back and flexed his long fingers on the armrest.

We had been flying for several hours now, methodically and painstakingly overlapping our sweeps of the whole expanse of the Jundland Wastes and surrounding mountains. We had started at points closest to Mos Eisley and worked our way out, widening the search area as we made our way toward the Dune Sea to encompass it all.

I had tested the sweep sensitivity over the vaporators at Nadon's home in the hills outside the city with success, locating them with ease. It would work, the instruments were working fine, there was simply not a match out here yet.

The Ithorian suddenly spoke, shattering the relative silence of the cockpit with his slow words, "In my experience, that for which we search most earnestly, is that which eludes us most skillfully."

I continued watching out the front port, "That definitely seems to be the case so far, but I think if I'm ever going to find General Kenobi's home, this is my best chance of ever doing so." I reached for the handheld locator lying on the panel before me, tilting the screen toward me. The blip was still near the outer fringes. "Felth is still patrolling the city. We have a little more time before dawn, at which time he'll be returning to headquarters. We have to be back before that happens." Nadon nodded, his eyes blinking slowly.

As we continued on into the darkness, I wondered what was happening on the far side of Tatooine, and hoping the others were faring better than we were in their search for information.

Holder's story could either be absolute truth or Gundaark droppings. We needed something to put our minds at ease about him and how to deal with him once he recovered. We had to be able to trust him with our lives, to watch our backs. We had to know for sure, there could be no question.

I closed my eyes and stretched a bit. The little astromech was almost ready for another power-up attempt. A few days and it would be ready.

The Sentinel continued on, flying into the darkness above the gently blowing sands of the cool and deceptively serene Tatooine night.

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The shuttle's flight path had taken the others away from the spaceport traffic that surrounded Mos Eisley and off in the same direction as the planetary rotation. As they drew closer to the surface, 0600 realized that by doing so, they had skipped over the Tatooine night. His hands moved over the instruments making small course adjustments, "Great. Work all day, take off and fly right into another day. I hope everybody in the back had the sense to shut their eyes, 'cause

it looks like dawn just broke. It's a new day already." BoShek nodded somewhat as he drifted in and out of the haze of subconsciousness.

The ship knifed through the air as 0600 pulled back on several control arms and leveled out, skimming across the surface. BoShek sat up and forward, rubbing his eyes and face, fighting back the fatigue as the daylight now streamed in through the sloping front port, "One part of this rock looks pretty much like another; sand, rocks, stony mountains . . . all of it parched and dead."

Below in the cargo area, Rogue unclipped from his jump seat and stepped up behind them to get a better look at where they were. The rolling, sandy edges of the Dune Sea gave way to massive stone ridges and jagged spires thrust up from beneath the surface. Strange rock formations slipped by beneath the Lambda class shuttle as they drew closer to the dig site.



With his eyes remaining focused through the transparisteel on the rugged landscape ahead, he directed a question to BoShek, "How much further is it?" The spacer took a good look at the familiar landscape and estimated roughly in his head, "Ten minutes maybe?" Rogue nodded and headed back down to prep the others for their arrival.

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The blip that showed me where Felth was had begun to move back toward the center point. "Looks like it's time to head back. Felth is finishing his perimeter patrol and heading back to base through the spaceport. He'll probably . . ."

It was at that moment while I was speaking that one of the panel monitor's suddenly emitted a tone and data began scrolling down the screen as it searched to cross-match the signal it had picked up. Nadon sat up in his chair and watched with keen eyes as the data continued to scroll. Then, the data stream halted for a second, and a final flashing status line was displayed:

Class III Evaporative Condenser Unit
Model: Unknown
Motor Frequency: MATCHED
Motor Type: SM999
Malfunctions Noted: Valve Adjuster (Collection Tank is Full)

He looked up at me, "It looks as if the elusive has just been uncovered. Well done, boy. Well done." I recorded the location of the signal and switched off the sensors, "Now we know where it is, but we'll have to come back. Felth is almost done with his patrol, we have no time to spare. This will have to wait until we have more time to spend." He shook his large head in agreement as I banked the ship into a curving turn and headed back to the city.

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The air, heated by the early morning suns, was already oppressive and washed over the disembarking troops as they descended the boarding ramp and out from the cool shadows of the ship. They stepped off to the drawn, cracked ground outside, rifles at the ready, and stopped momentarily, looking around to get their bearings and assess the surroundings. Like BoShek had said, it was pretty much like every other part of this rock they had seen. Stretching out before them, leading away through a light sandy haze to a jagged, jutting range of hills was a flat, dry expanse of ground.



Their backpack units silently cycled on with mild vibrations they all felt in the shoulder straps. Thermal body gloves switched into cooling mode, and as the group turned away from the hills and passed beneath the sloped nose of the shuttle, the headquarters for the dig site came into view.

The only sound to break the dead calm was that of the occasional wind gust blowing between the barrels of the wing-mounted guns overhead, and around the extended flaps of the landing gear. It also whipped through and around the now-silent towers, buildings and equipment of the dig site that had been left behind. A swarm of Skettos, disturbed by the appearance of the shuttle, was now settling back to the peaks of the stony ridges to watch the arrival of the newcomers.

As large as this facility before them was, it was dwarfed by the enormous pit that lay behind it to the East. In the distance, the ground seemed to break and angle steeply down toward the crater. This was the very precarious overhang that BoShek had mentioned. Beyond the rim, the dark, gaping hole stretched out as far as the eye could see toward the distant horizon.

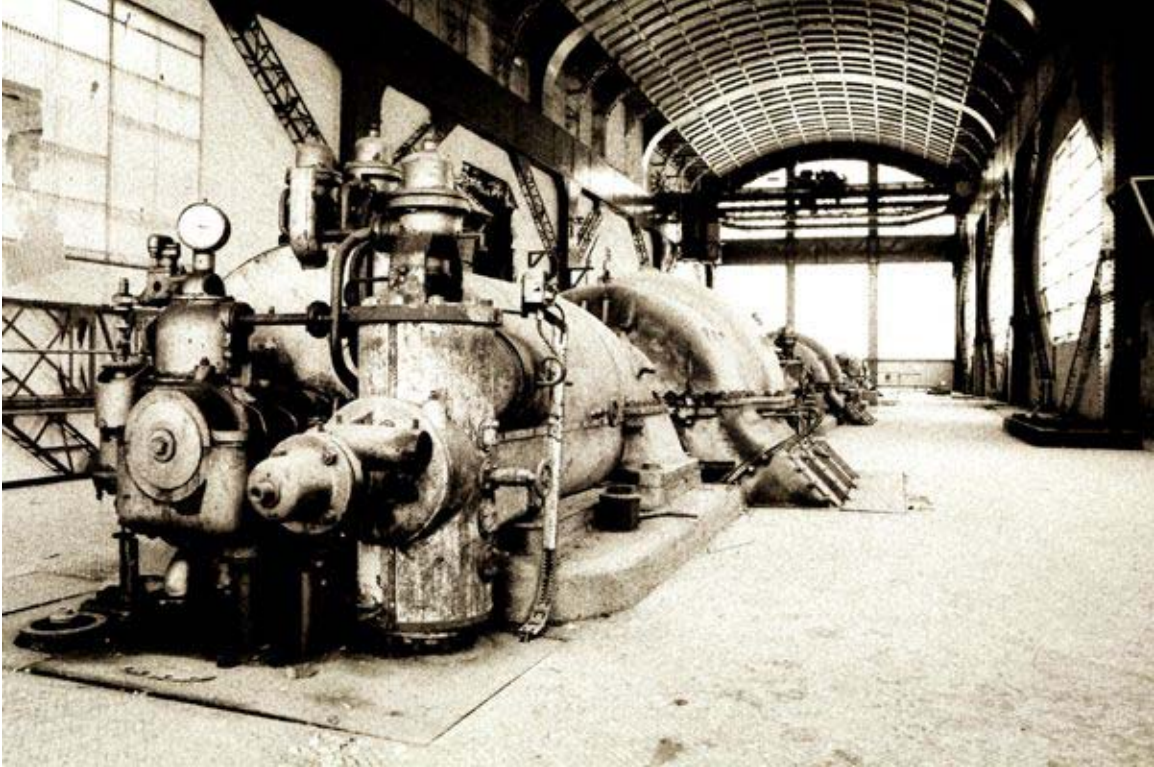
BoShek unzipped the seal on several diagonal vent openings across the front of his suit and one under each of his arms as he stepped over to Rogue with sweat forming on his brow, "C'mon, let's go. The main office complex is over there" he said, pointing. He began walking toward the abandoned remains of the Imperial facility, with the assembly of ten troopers falling into step behind him. Danz glanced down and out the lower opening of his helmet at the arid ground beneath his boots as they walked, shaking his head and thinking about his childhood home on the ocean-covered world of Bestine IV.



The tired, worn buildings of the site now towered above them, stretching up into the sky. The smell of machinery and lubricants was almost as heavy as the silent presence they felt here. They could nearly hear the echoes of the silenced voices and activity as they continued down the man-made canyon of buildings. Rubble and broken pieces of that distant past were now strewn everywhere.



The facility had clearly been worked to the limits for many years, coring out huge volumes of ore to supply secret Imperial construction sites with the raw materials to build bases, ships and Tarkin's Death Star for the Emperor. Tarkin was a shrewd one. He had undoubtedly seen to it that the coring project operated outside the scope of the Mining Guild, although out here on the fringes of explored space, no one would have pressed the issue anyway. They continued on until BoShek stepped up to a large bay door and gave it a hefty shove with his shoulder, moving it aside and entering into the large room beyond. All filed through after him into a deep, but narrow warehouse-style room. Light filtered through milky, opaque plates of worn transparisteel and far overhead was an arched ceiling.



Their guide walked past a huge, rusting hulk of a machine of some unknown type on their left as he moved toward the back of the room. "The metals of this equipment act like a condenser plate", he said as he walked past not bothering to stop or look back, "They heat up during the day and cool off at night, forming moisture, which in turn causes rust. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to continue salvaging here. The rust is getting worse and worse all the time." Falker ran his gloved hand over the rusty machine as he passed by.

BoShek continued on to an opening in the wall just beyond. He switched on the overhead illuminators which shed dim light down a long hallway. "We're not far now. The offices are down here", he said as he continued along. "These lights are powered by the suns. Some of the illuminators are burned out, but there's light in most places." The group walked in silence, save the clatter of their boots and the clapping of armor plates. After several minutes of walking on a gentle, downward slope, they came to a massive set of thick, heavy blast doors, which thankfully had been left open.



Etz, who was in the rear of the group with Blade, noticed a slight flicker in the light. He glanced back down the hall behind them and thought he saw a black shape disappearing to one side of the distant doorway. He dismissed it almost immediately; certain it was a shadow, then looked back once more to settle the doubt that had immediately set in.

The hallway finally opened into a larger room. A hovering repulsor sled sat beneath the overhead illuminator in the center of the room.



"This is the main office, or what's left of it" said BoShek, spreading out his arms to show off the space. "Most things were probably stripped when the dig was shut down, but this is it." The troops spread out and began searching for anything that linked Holder to this site as Rogue spoke to the spacer, "Where is the carbon-freezing chamber?"

BoShek turned around to face him, "That's down a few levels. Let's make sure you're done here, and then we can move on and head down there."

Rogue nodded and stepped away to join the search as BoShek turned to cautiously peered back down the hallway, one hand on his blaster.

* * *

Felth walked into the dim bunkroom and pulled off his helmet. Holder was in his bunk asleep, and the lifeless droid sat silently beside mine with its head off. He dropped his bucket and blaster on a bunk and slipped his pack off, wondering where I was, "Deckard?"

There was no response from the dark, only silence.

"Where is he?" he thought. "He's supposed to be working on the `droid and watching Holder."

In a gut-wrenching moment of startled realization, he briskly walked back into the command center and flipped on the holo-port to check the log. His outbound message was there.

TO: BASE ONE, SKYWALKER.

Perspiration suddenly dampened his skin as he realized his error. Damn. He had forgotten to wait for it to send and then erase it. Suddenly, all sorts of paranoid thoughts began to race through Felth's mind. Had Deckard figured him out? He was usually more than careful to cover his tracks, how could he have been so careless this time? He made a mental note to begin setting up a contingency plan for escape in case he should be discovered.

When news of the Death Star's destruction had finally reached their small group, he secretly cheered inside, hoping that the information he passed to Dodonna had helped in some way. His new position as Information Officer definitely opened doors for allowing him more uninterrupted holonet time, but he had an uneasy feel about his fellow troopers all of a sudden.

He was about to check to see if the log had been accessed when the sound of the mechanical freight lift initiated in the storage room. He quickly jogged through the bunk room and stuck his head through the door just in time to see the rising platform come to a stop at the ground level with me on it, "All done with your rounds?" I asked, juggling several electronic parts in my hands.

"What were you doing down there?" he asked, looking in the direction of the lower level, "I thought the `droid was already almost prepped for another test run?"

I stepped off the platform and walked past him toward my bunk, laying the parts out, "It is almost ready. These are going to be used to make a surge suppressing unit so that what happened last time won't happen again. You OK, Felth? Did something happen on your patrol?"

He calmed a bit, "A few unruly drunks over at the Dowager Queen, Jawas loitering in several of the bay pits looking for parts, nothing too far out of ordinary for this scum-hole I would say."

"That's a really bizarre place. I ran into the manager when I was out looking for parts the other day and asked him about it. He says it was a colony ship from Bestine IV that crash-landed here a hundred years ago. There are sections of the ship scattered all over this area. Some of the smaller pieces have become makeshift shelters for the homeless, but the surviving skeleton of the main section became the basis for the hotel. I learn more and more about this place every day. You should get out some and mingle, away from that holo-net port sometime."

He watched as I began to work, "Interesting. Yeah. I'll have to do that." He said as he walked back into the command center. I began my work on the new parts, pretending not to notice what he was doing. He went straight to the holo-net console and deleted the log entry. Then he re-emerged into the bunk room pulling off his armor plates and closing the transparisteel portals, darkening the room as he spoke, "I'm sure you were able to rest some with Holder sleeping. I'm gonna catch a little sleep, do you mind working on that somewhere else where there's light?"

I looked over at him across the dim room, "Sure, I can work down in the cache." I gathered up my parts and disappeared into the back room. Felth finished slipping off his gear, kicked off his boots and rolled into his bunk. He had to be more careful, there was too much at stake now, for him and the Alliance. Uneasily he closed his eyes as he adjusted his aching feet.

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The whine of the lift mechanism hummed for a few seconds and the platform vibrated under my boots until I reached the bottom. I walked through the doorway into the dim room, setting the electronics down on the tech bench as I crossed the floor to the bay. I moved 'round behind the troop transport and secured the lock on the upper doors.

That had been too close. I had just made it in before Felth came through the front door. I jumped up on the tailboard of the transport and grabbed hold of a fine, dangling cord that ran down from an overhead pipe. I whipped it to free the grappling hook on the other end that was caught on the pipe. It released and fell away, dropping into my waiting hands, cord trailing behind it.

I glanced up to the closed doors in the ceiling as I attached the cord to my belt and depressed the re-coil button. The line quickly was wound up on the take-up reel in the belt compartment. I finished the task by replacing the folded tines of the hook in its pouch. I would have to be more careful next time. Coming in that way wasn't easy! The engines on the Sentinel above the doors in the rear courtyard should be cool by the time Felth woke up.

I hopped off the tailboard and headed back toward the tech bench to get to work. The fabricated story of the surge suppressing unit wasn't such a bad idea after all.

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Garindan moved closer, into a better position in the narrow alley beside our headquarters, as Nadon looked slowly around, and then climbed into his speeder and drove away, heading for home. He glanced momentarily back at the Sentinel, listening to the creaking of the cooling engines, then turned back to watch the Ithorian Arborist disappear into the gathering morning crowd on the streets.

He unwrapped a small stick of Glitterstim which instantly began to sparkle a brilliant blue in his hands as it came in contact with the light. He slipped it in his mouth and began to chew it, feeling the old familiar burn and tingling in his cheeks and the back of his throat. He swallowed and closed the sensitive eyes beneath his protective goggles feeling the warmth move down into

his belly. His body relaxed as he slipped back into the shadows.

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"There's nothing here. We've been over this room three times now" said Falker as he sat down on the repulsor sled. "He's right. We're wasting our time now." said 0600. Topolev leaned his rifle against the wall. Hung his bucket over the exposed butt-end of his holstered E-11 and ripped open a packaged ration bar. He squeezed his eyes shut and took a bite as Etz spoke up, "You eating another one of those?"

Topolev chewed, swallowed part of his mouthful and continued chewing on the rest as he replied, "Yeah, because they're THAT GOOD. No. Trust me; I held off as long as I could, I HATE these things. I had to live off them for awhile during my tour on Kashyyyk. They'll keep you alive, but the taste." He shuddered. "I'd be happy to never eat these things ever again. When we get back, I'm getting some real food."

Falker chuckled as the others walked over to them. BoShek was still eyeing the hallway they entered from, "If you've finished your search here. Let's head on down to where the carbon freezing chamber is." He turned back to face Rogue, who nodded his agreement, "Right. Let's move on!" Ddraig fell in behind BoShek as he exited the room through a broad doorway. The others followed.

They were led down another corridor, and eventually past a low, half-wall as their guide pressed on. Blade leaned over the wall to check out what was on the other side as they walked past. He stuck his head over and found himself peering down a rectangular shaft that bit deep into the surface of the planet.



The outside walls were draped with descending flights of stairs almost as far as he could see. He quickly pulled his head back as BoShek stepped through an open archway to the top step and

paused, turning to them, "Now . . . we go down."

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Through the slot cut in the stone, Leia watched light rains fall softly across the lush green jungle. She sat quietly in the darkness on the stone sill, her long hair blowing in the cool, gentle breeze as she looked out over the ancient ceremonial grounds surrounding the Massassi temple.

She turned her gaze away from the opening and back to see the new rebel Commander, Luke Skywalker shifting position in the chair where he had fallen asleep. They had talked at length about how each of them had come to be where they were now, and how Luke had known Ben Kenobi his whole life, but had never really been around him for any of it.

He had confided in her, entrusted with her his longing to have known Ben sooner, and in turn to have learned more about his father and mother. His opportunity to discover details about his parents had slipped through his fingers with Ben's death. Just knowing that his father was a Jedi would have been enough to drive him on when he felt lowest, out working on vaporators.

Ben had visited him at the homestead several times over the years, until once, when he came bearing a gift, Uncle Owen sent him away. Even after that happened, although he felt completely alone, he also remembered somehow feeling safe and watched over.

Although from drastically different childhood lives, he and Leia had both been thrown together by similar circumstances, both now orphaned and their homes lost. The lower lids of her deep brown eyes suddenly welled with tears that glistened in the dim light. When they could no longer be contained, tears fell, silently trailing down her stoic cheeks as she thought of her father and home on Alderaan, now gone. So much had been lost.

The pain increased, rising in her chest and throat as her stomach quivered. Her eyes closed forcing the next wave of tears over the edge and down her face as the wind caught her hair and she turned again to silently stare at the rain.

Luke moved slightly, shifting again in the chair, mumbling something about Ben. His eyes darted back and forth beneath closed lids as he watched images unfolding in his dreams.

The obscure layers of consciousness slipped elusively by as his dreams progressed, pulling him into deeper and deeper sleep. His disjointed dream-thoughts were now mingling with the energies of the light side of the Force and taking on more continuity and clarity. The spirit of Obi-Wan was closer than Luke could have ever imagined as images began appearing in his mind's eye. The murky dream-images became somewhat clearer now.

He was on Tatooine wearing a hooded cloak, walking atop a rocky ridge somewhere in the Jundland wastes. The view before him was an expansive one, out over the ridge at someone working on a condenser. The person working was leaning inside one of the control covers of a moisture vaporator with a box of tools behind him in the sand.

The figure reached back one-handed toward the toolbox trying to grab a tool without pulling his head out of the machine. As Luke watched the figure grope blindly for the tool, several tools in the box rose up, hanging in midair, until one dropped to the sand and slid to within the reach of the mechanic. His fingers closed around the tool and he went back to work, none the wiser about what had just occurred.

Luke smiled, realizing that the Force must have moved the tools. Suddenly, his dream-state point of view shifted out of his hooded body and moved away, turning to look back at himself until he saw that it was not his own face that he saw staring back, it was Obi-Wan, grinning like a proud father.



The dream-view then shifted back to the mechanic who pulled his head out of the machine and stood up, replacing a floppy hat and goggles on his head as he turned to walk to a nearby Treadwell 'droid and landspeeder. The mechanic was him! Obi-Wan HAD been watching him, and apparently he had been exhibiting Force-sensitive behavior, much to the delight of the old Jedi.

The image of the smiling Jedi began to darken as the old man's voice echoed in his ears, "Luke. Trust your feelings. Return to my home. From there you will be led along your way. You are not alone."

The voice drifted away as the dream vision faded into absolute blackness. His eyes opened and he sat motionless in the chair, feeling his slow breathing flow in and out. Leia was across the room, her back to him, and he heard the gentle sound of steady rain.

He allowed himself to digest what he had just experienced. Had it been a dream? He knew in his heart he had to return to Tatooine. Leia wiped her face with her hands and rose silently, walking to the door. He remained still, and closed his eyes, feigning sleep, watching her in the darkness. She slipped out and closed the door behind.

He looked back to the window . . . to the rain and closed his eyes.

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The troops had been descending the stone steps for some time when 4120 finally spoke up, "BoShek, how much deeper do we have to go before we reach the level with the carbon freezing chamber?"

The spacer stopped and turned back, looking up the steps to the trooper four back in line that had asked the question, "It's another seven levels. I know it's a long way, and normally we could have taken a lift to get there, but with the power plant offline, we have to walk it. The carbon freeze chamber was almost never used. It was only put here in case anything unusual and of interest to the Empire's scientists was discovered while digging. There's very little to find on this planet except rock and more rock. It's my guess that since it wasn't used all that often, it was placed down here in an out of the way location. We're almost there." He caught sight of motion further up on a higher level of the stairs, only for a moment, and then nothing. "Come on, let's get moving. It's not far."

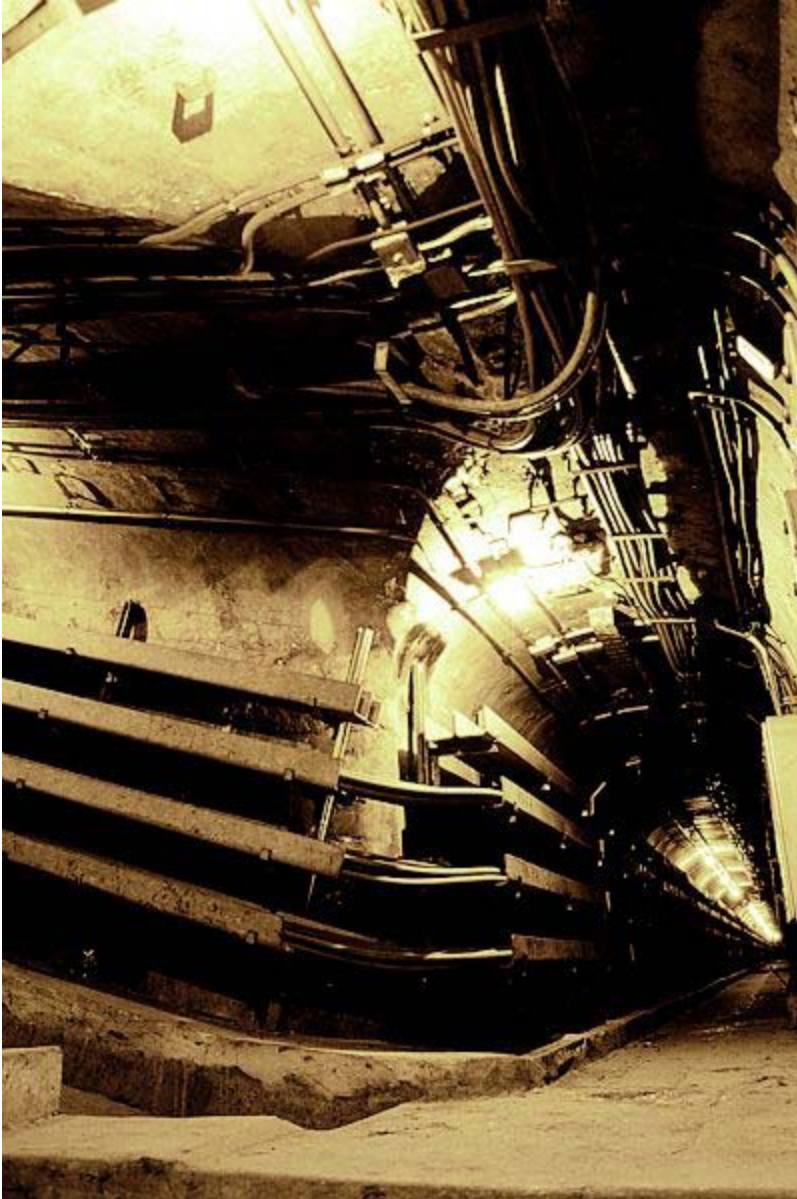
He turned and continued down the twisting stairs.

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Above them, a dark shape listened cautiously until it heard the troops begin moving downward once again. Only then did it continue its own downward descent.

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Finally BoShek came to a side corridor that led away from the still-descending stairs. He stepped through it, across a short landing and down a single flight of stairs which spilled out into a long corridor. Bundles of sagging cables ran along the walls and ceiling and stretched out as far as the eye could see in both directions.



"This way" he said half under his breath as he turned sharply to the left, heading down the long corridor. The group continued on, passing intersecting corridors and continuing on straight until they arrived at a plate durasteel wall with a small hatch in it. The hatch had been left swung open, most likely by the last of the troops and dig operators as they left this place. Beyond, we could see yet another room with a door on the far side.



Our guide stepped up and through the hatch. Etz and Blade fell back, turning to look back down the hallway, watching their backs as the rest also proceeded through. When all others had gone, they turned and stepped through as well.

The others had already begun walking toward the door on the far side. Etz and Blade followed silently through the unremarkable room until the all came to the far wall and the closed door set into it.



BoShek stepped up close to it, rotated the durasteel wheel-handle and pushed it open with his shoulder. A harsh metal on metal squealing echoed off the stone walls as it rocked open.

He stepped through and switched on additional emergency lighting overhead, brightly illuminating the room. Everyone filed through, following him inside. "OK, we're here. Those things over there on the green support stands are the carbon freezing chambers."



Rogue and the others turned their attention to the small metallic chambers. He took his helmet off as he continued to stare, "I thought they would be much larger, if not take up an entire room. I've seen a few carbon freezing chambers over the years and they were ALL larger than these", he said as he stepped closer, noting the grates in the floor.

BoShek nodded, grinning a bit, "Yeah. Believe me, that's the only reason they're still here. They're so small I can't find anyone interested in buying them, otherwise I would have moved these things a long time ago."

0600 pulled off his helmet, "Let's start looking, you guys know the drill. Find anything that might link Holder to this place." The troops spread out in different directions going over every inch of the room. 1265 and Danz were inspecting a control area along one of the walls when Ddraig spoke up, breaking the silence, "I think I found something."

The others stopped their searching and walked over to where Ddraig had been looking. He was crouched down by a small set of durasteel shelves running along one of the walls adjacent to the chambers. Wires and hoses were draped across them, and in the center of the second shelf was a cylinder with several adjustment knobs set into the grip. It could only have been a lightsaber hilt. Ddraig reached in and pulled it out, holding it up to the light for everyone to see. Falker silently strained his neck to see over Topolev's shoulder.

Part of the handle near the emitter had a hole pierced all the way through the casing. Black scorch marks stained the otherwise shiny handle around the rough holes on both sides. He rolled the lightsaber over in his hands. As he rotated it, he could hear something tumbling inside the damaged casing and focusing cup.

He rolled the hilt around until a small object fell out of the blast hole to the floor. Ddraig retrieved it and held it up to the light overhead between his gloved fingertips. It was a crimson crystal. The kind found in a Sith Lord's sword, or that of a Jedi Hunter.

Ddraig turned to look up at Rogue, handing the lightsaber to him, "Looks like Holder's story holds up so far."

As he spoke, we all heard the clanging of metal on stone from outside the hatch. BoShek was standing beside it. He spun his head to look back the way we had come. His eyes widened a bit as he grabbed the hatch, quickly swinging it shut, "Damn."

"What is it?" asked Rogue.

The spacer was rapidly rotating the hatch wheel to lock down the door, then shot a glance over to Rogue, "We're not alone down here."

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