

Chapter 31 – Divulgence

“I’m telling you that’s what he said, a genetic duplicate.” Blade waited for a reaction.

Rogue sat down in one of the lobby chairs, thinking. He noticed the female Rodian seated behind the sign-in desk, busily noting charts as he began digesting the information. He looked up to Blade after the brief silence. “Have you mentioned this to anyone else yet?”

Blade shook his head. “No.”

Rogue nodded slowly. “Good. Let’s keep it that way until after I can speak with Holder about it.”

There was another, shorter silence before Rogue spoke up again. “Did the doctor say how long we were going to have to wait out here before we can go back to see Holder?”

Blade shrugged. “Not really. He said Holder was awake, but that he had to finish his examination and run a few more tests before he would let us back to see him, and even then only for a short time.”

It was at that moment that I came through the front door, spilling into the lobby with Etz, Danz and Felth.

Pulling the hot bucket from my head, I wiped a hand across my sweaty face. “Any word yet?”

Blade shook his head. “We’re still waiting to get in.”

I nodded. “I want to get another look at the old man’s body. There’s something really familiar about him.”

Felth and the others collapsed into adjacent chairs, pulling off their helmets as I continued. “I remember seeing those tattoos he has on his arms before. I just want to get a better look at them to see if it’ll jog my memory as to where I saw them.”

“I didn’t even realize he had tattoos” said Blade, as he handed my gloves back. He glanced over to Rogue, who shook his head indicating he didn’t know it either.

“Yeah, I saw them when Topolev, Danz and Ddraig loaded the body in the transport. One of his arms fell back when they lifted him up over the tailboard. I didn’t see all of them, but what I could see, I recognized.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

The door to the back room opened slightly and doc Shurte stuck his head through, twisting it our way. "You can come back now." He disappeared back through the swinging door.

We all filed through the door, walking past a table filled with various instruments and containers holding body parts adjacent to a medical 'droid that was performing an autopsy. We kept moving and circled around Holder's bed. Various monitoring tools on stands flanked him on both sides. His eyes opened as we drew near, and he tried to speak, though his voice was quite hoarse. "What the hell happened? How long have I been here?"

Before we could answer, doc Shurte stepped up beside Holder, checking the monitors as he spoke. "You've been here a little over a week's time, my boy. As for what happened; well, carbon freezing, especially extended entombments such as yours, can do strange things to our neural paths. From time to time, routes used to recall certain memories get crossed or destroyed altogether. When the brain can't make sense of what is happening, confusion and frustration usually ensues, and on occasion can trigger an obstruction-based seizure. The brain basically gets stuck in a loop trying to find the right path, and accidentally heads down the wrong one."

Holder raised an eyebrow. "Seizure, huh?" He rubbed his head a bit and rolled it to the side, staring up at the doctor. "Well whatever happened out there in the sand, and in the time between, I remember a lot more now. It's like I opened a door to a room full of memories I didn't even know were missing. Some of the pieces are still falling into place, but I feel a lot more complete now."

Doc Shurte furrowed his brow as he thought. "It sounds as if somewhere along the line, an alternate course to your memories was discovered. Perhaps when it happened, out in the dunes, it was too much for your brain to manage all at once, and you fell into the seizure. Very interesting."

The doctor opened a flimsy journal and began scratching a few notes. "Feel free to stay a few minutes more, but he will need time to rest soon." He turned away and headed over to the table where the 'droid was finishing up on the corpse.

I stepped away from Holder's bed as the others moved in to talk briefly with him. "Doc?"

He turned back to me momentarily, as he pulled on a pair of gloves. "Yes?"

"Doc, will you pull Watcher's body out? I need to check something."

He eyed me a second, sizing me up. "Of course."

He turned away, walking over to the wall-mounted drawers, pulling one open. He slid the durasteel lid back. "Nope. Wrong one."

The Sandtrooper's Story

He closed it up quickly and pulled the one next to it out. "This is it." He pulled the drawer all the way out and slid the durasteel cover back in, exposing the body.

I reached out, slipping the loose sleeves of the desert wraps up, exposing his forearms. Both were littered with intertwining images of starships, asteroids and a number of attractive females from multiple species in various poses.

The medical 'droid whirred away behind me, working to close up the incised body it had finished with.

"I know I've seen these tattoos before. Where was it?" I squeezed my eyes shut, concentrating, trying to remember where it was.

I smelled the smoke rising up from the 'droids cauterizing tool as it worked behind me. As soon as I smelled it, a flash of memories gelled in my head. I saw smoking, skeletal remains lying in the sand. It was the morning we had questioned Owen and Beru Lars. The very same distinct smell of burnt flesh had lingered in my helmet all that morning and well into the next day. As we walked that morning from the Sentinel at the spaceport back to our barracks, I remembered seeing a haggard old man with a white beard begging on the side of the road. He had tattoos of women and starships that disappeared up under his sleeves. He had these very tattoos.

"Remember anything?" asked the doctor.

I pulled the sleeves down again. "Yeah. Yeah, I remember it now. Thanks doc."

"What'd you remember, Deck?" asked Rogue, walking over.

I pulled the sleeves back up, revealing the markings. "I saw him on the roadside in Mos Eisley the day we questioned Owen and Beru Lars. I remembered seeing them, but can't make any other connection. It just seems off that he would be begging in town, only to be found murdered and displayed all the way out there in the dunes; why would someone go to all the trouble of moving the body that far when there are any number of places to leave it in the city?"

Rogue nodded. "It does seem a little strange that this guy would find his way out that far, alive or dead."

He walked back over to Holder's bed as he pulled out a small datapad, and lay a hand on the Commando's shoulder. "Holder, does this mean anything to you, now that you remember a bit more?" He looked at the pad's screen to make sure he had it right. "Out by the condenser, after you recognized Watcher and were seizing, you kept repeating '08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450. Get rid of it all, no mistakes. No mistakes.' Any idea what that means?"

The Sandtrooper's Story

Holder's face went white as bone as the memories associated with that phrase fell into place.

"Yeah. I know what that means." He said, swallowing as he looked around at each of us.

"It means we have a new search ahead of us."

* * *

A tight formation of four fighters skimmed across the barren wastelands and violent, volcanic surface of Sullust. Han and Luke led the way, closely followed by Wedge and Dack.

As they raced past a huge SoroSuub mining compound, Solo keyed the comm and glanced through the canopy of his Y-wing, across to Luke. "I don't get it. We're not setting down anywhere or even really looking for anything. Why are we doing this?"

Luke turned to look back at him. "We're running fake reconnaissance missions to throw off the Empire. If they think we're still looking for a base, they'll assume we haven't settled anywhere yet. SoroSuub Corporation had control of Sullust for a long time, and was loyal to the Empire until the Sullustans recently took it back."

Wedge chimed in as he pulled his ship in a bit closer. "There are bound to be some left here still loyal to the Empire. Our flight through definitely won't go unnoticed or unreported."

Luke's voice crackled in their headsets as he looked around. "I think that's probably enough of a show, but you know as rough as this place is, it might actually have some future potential."

"You think?" laughed Solo.

"So we're done?" asked Dack.

"You heard the Commander" said Wedge. "Let's head out. All ships break right and climb, on my mark. And . . . Mark."

The formation broke right and streaked up through dense banks of toxic clouds and storms of intense electrical discharges. As they passed out of the atmosphere into the cold of space, a sensor on one of the nearby orbital platforms activated, its' guns swiveling to lock on to the passing ships.

From out of nowhere a hailstorm of blaster fire erupted from the platform, spitting through the black void. They sliced between the ships until they found a mark, piercing the fuselage of Wedge's X-wing. Alarms rang out in his cockpit as another round of fire

The Sandtrooper's Story

stabbed at them from the platform. The four ships rolled apart. Wedge limped away in his damaged ship, flanked by Luke, as Han and Dack turned sharply toward the source. They lock onto the platform as yet more blasts streaked at them from out of the darkness. Solo rolled over sharply and fell away to avoid them. Dack rolled and climbed in the opposite direction to engage.

As they did, a second platform sensed their presence and activated its gun turrets swiveling to lock on.

Dack lined up his shot on the first platform, locked on and fired as Solo came around to face the second. The coordinated blasts from Dack's four wing-mounted cannons tracked across the darkness, shredding the guns of the first platform. He released the trigger as his target erupted in a momentary fireball. "Wahoo!"

Sensing the destruction of the first platform, the second immediately deployed a shield, which encircled it completely. Han fired at the gun array as they spewed blaster fire in his direction, but his blasts glanced off and were redirected as he rolled away.

"That thing's got shields up, Han. Let's get out of here before any others lock on" yelled Luke. "Follow me."

With blaster fire burning past their ships, the others fell in behind him, heading away from the planet and its moon. As soon as the platform sensed their withdrawal it ceased firing.

"Damn." Wedge keyed his comm. "My sensors are fried and my targeting array is gone. I'm not going to be able to make it with you to Malastare."

Luke brought his X-wing in alongside Wedge, eyeing the damage. "Han, I'll take him back to base. You and Dack go on ahead to Malastare."

"You sure, kid?" asked Solo. "We could all turn back."

Luke shook his head. "No. You go on and complete the flight, just keep Dack close to you. We'll see you back at base."

The crippled fighter and its escort peeled off from the group as the astromechs in both plotted their hyperspace jump. With a flash they were gone.

*

Both X-wing fighters reverted from hyperspace in synch, reappearing in normal space just short of Hoth VI.

The Sandtrooper's Story

“Wedge, can you make it to base from here?”

“Yeah, I think so. Why? Do you have an appointment to keep?”

“Actually . . . I do” said Luke. “Rieeken knows I’ll be gone, but will you let Leia know I should only be a few days.”

“Yes, sir Rogue Leader. Rogue Two out.”

Luke watched Wedge enter the upper atmosphere and dive for the frozen surface below before rolling away.

“R2?”

The ‘droid squawked back his brief reply.

“Set a course for Tatooine.”

Calculations were run, and the little ‘droid adjusted the course heading slightly as Luke settled back in his seat and closed his eyes. As he did, R2 engaged the hyperdrive engines, catapulting them on their way toward his master’s home world.

*

Locked into the X-wing’s ‘droid socket, the little blue astromech was busy monitoring the snub ship’s course and operation data. Engine performance was optimal and steady, cockpit pressure was stable, and the temperature inside was comfortable by human standards. He silently took note that his master was fast asleep as they raced through hyperspace en route from Hoth to Tatooine.

Inside the cockpit, the young rebel pilot had succumbed to a few moments reprieve into a deep slumber. More strange dreams of a somewhat familiar place were once again taking shape as he rested. Dreams that were just as disjointed and bizarre as his life had become . . .

The fog-shrouded jungle was navigationally unforgiving by air, and nearly impassable on foot. Visibility was only about 5 meters, with nothing but dense jungle swamplands littered with massive trees to see anyway. Far overhead, beyond the shrouding fog and low clouds, the tree canopy teemed with all manner of life. Cries and shrieks filtered down through the heavy grey veil to the ground.

Thick decorated snakes slowly twisted themselves around branches, watching silently as lizards hissed, spitting forked tongues into the air to get a taste of the newcomers, and all

The Sandtrooper's Story

manner of wildlife slunk away into the tall grasses and mud as the small band worked their way through the difficult terrain.

He was trudging through the calf-deep mud and mists with Leia, the two 'droids and an old woman whose face he did not know. Slowly, out of the haze ahead, came the vague outline of an enormous, crumbling stone temple.

There was a flash as his dream skipped ahead suddenly. He and Leia were now alone inside the structure. Although he had not seen it happen, he somehow knew the old woman had gone off on her own leaving the 'droids outside. Ben Kenobi sat atop a large, displaced stone block to his left, silently watching, giving only a slight nod of acknowledgment to the pair as they entered the building.

He heard a grinding stone-on-stone sound from the ceiling above, and only barely managed to shove Leia out of the path of the falling rock. It crashed into the ground beside him as he fell to one side to avoid being crushed. Then it toppled back toward him, falling across his right thigh and calf, pinning him to the floor. Luke looked over to where Ben had been sitting to ask his master for help, only to find that what he thought was Obi-Wan was really a lichen-encrusted statue; toppled and broken.

A shower of other smaller stones fell from the curved dome ceiling overhead, cascading to the stone floor into a pile of broken shards and a fine stone dust cloud. Luke tried hard to focus. He didn't think the large rock pinning him had broken his leg bone, but there was too much weight behind it for him to move it even slightly. Leia tried in vain to help as the dust began to settle and thin in the air.

As it cleared, a new outline emerged atop the pile of stones. It was clad completely in black armor, and suddenly the hiss of a mechanical respirator cycled on and off . . . on and off . . . on and off.

Leia's eyes went wide and her mouth silently formed his name, remembering her interrogation session with him on the Death Star. The dark figure snapped his crimson lightsaber on and slowly climbed down the pile of stone toward them. He casually swung the energy blade back and forth in bright arcs, chopping almost playfully at several large stone pieces.

Without looking up, Luke instinctively reached for the sword hilt hanging on his belt as he felt the cold presence in his veins.

"Vader."

The jungles suddenly evaporated away as he was abruptly awakened by R2 in the cockpit of his fighter. The navigational indicator on the console showed a necessary course adjustment marker approaching near Bpfassh. He yawned and shook his head a bit as he pulled off his helmet and wiped a bit of perspiration from his forehead remembering the temple from the mists. "Pomojema."

The Sandtrooper's Story

R2 beeped and whistled an inquiry, curious about what his master had just whispered.

“No R2, we’re not going to Pomojema, it’s just a place from a dream.”

He thought a moment about what he had blurted out and the astromech’s response, then turned his head back toward the little ‘droid. “R2, if I did want to go to Pomojema . . . where would we be going?”

The little droid gurgled a bit and the translated data stream appeared on the ship’s monitor on the console in front of him: **Mimban**.

Mimban? He thought to himself. He had never even heard of Pomojema or Mimban, and wondered why he was dreaming of a swampy, rainy mud hole like that.

R2 generated the reversion checklist for him as Luke prepared to slip out of hyperspace. He would have to make the course change in normal space and then reset the ‘nav computer for a second jump to Tatooine.

* * *

“What do you mean a new search?” asked Rogue. “What are we looking for?”

He stepped away from the bed, pacing a bit, then turned back to Holder. “You need to start from as far back as you can, and catch us up, brother.”

The monitors bleeped away in the silence that had suddenly fallen over the room as Holder shifted slightly in the bed. He ran a hand through his hair, visibly struggling to find a suitable place to begin.

He looked around the room at us as he spoke. “It’s important that you know I knew nothing of these events until after the fact. When we arrived in place of the intended crew, with our altered orders to manage the closing of the dig site, we had a fair amount of clean-up to do. There were mountains of files to sift through. Some were sent with the original crew, some were destroyed. The shipping contract had to be terminated, and the water contract held with Darklighter water had to be revised now that there was only a skeleton crew on site.” He scratched his arm where medical tape held a fluid line in place.

“It was during that push to finalize things that we discovered the importance of **08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450**. Watcher had taken over security duties, as that was his specialty. I had just finished de-briefing the last of the site’s personnel and sent their shuttle on its way when Watcher came to me with his discovery.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

Holder felt the pounding of the blood in his veins as he continued. "He had been given a small, shielded durasteel case. Along with it, he was given very unusual instructions by one of the crew leaders I had just de-briefed. His instructions were to feed it to the youngest Bantha on site and then turn the entire herd loose into the wild. Get rid of it all. No mistakes."

Felth interrupted him. "Wait a tick. You were told to feed the case to a Bantha?"

We were all just as lost as Felth.

Holder nodded. "Yes, we were told to feed it to a Bantha. The only thing I can think is that it was believed the Bantha would carry it around for the rest of its life, as it was too large to be passed, and that it would be buried in the sands when the beast died; truly within the belly of the beast."

Felth leaned forward a bit, arms crossed. "So what does that have to do with **08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450**?"

Holder nodded his head, understanding our confusion. "I was just coming to that. I know it doesn't make a lot of sense yet. Anyway, Watcher and I became suspicious of the possible contents of the case and decided to open it. After all, he had become head of security, and I was the Holder of mission secrets. When we finally did get it open, all we found was a security data card labeled with the range **08-02A1138 to 08-02A1450**. It wasn't until we plugged the card in to view its contents that the importance of it became clear."

He cleared his throat, and motioned for a cup of water. Etz poured a small cup and handed it to him. He drank it down and wiped his mouth, handing the cup back to Etz.

"The data stream we saw on that recording showed evidence of a murder."

We all shifted a bit as he continued.

"It happened deep within the dig site complex, in a dim, secluded corridor. Details were difficult to make out due to the poor lighting, but the victim was clearly identified by the conversation leading up to the murder itself. The killers were at that time nothing more than two contacts from the shipping contractor, both vying for a higher position within their group."

Holder paused and took a breath, looking around at us, then turned his head to lock eyes with Rogue.

"Matalla the Hutt was killed by Prince Xizor and the Nediji assassin, Kaird, of Black Sun."

The Sandtrooper's Story

* * *

A blistering, early morning wind blew across the spacious stone terrace of the Darklighter estate, blasting a bit of fine dust in his eyes as Luke lowered his head, pausing momentarily before continuing. Absolute silence had engulfed Huff, who had gone rigid. He saw Luke's mouth moving, but heard nothing more come out.

It was as if the mainspring that drives the mechanism at the very heart of the universe machine had suddenly snapped. The armatures that normally would have been ticking off the seconds and hours of infinity swung wildly out of control, reeling in the chaos of the moment to eventually rock back and forth at the bottom of the celestial clock face, slowly diminishing into an absolutely still, motionless stop.

The blood drained from his head as muscles all over his body began to twitch involuntarily from the sudden surge of adrenaline in his veins. He felt as if every bit of the solid ground surrounding them, except the square foot or two beneath his feet, had crumbled and fallen away, leaving him perched high atop a spindly stone spire, completely alone, completely isolated in his misery.

Biggs was dead? Vaporized? His eager young son with the quick smile and his mother's easy manner had been vaporized? There wouldn't even be anything to bury. Tears fell uncontrollably down his face as the raw grief ravaged his insides. His heart collapsed inward on itself as the disbelief and absolute sadness he felt was quickly followed by complete and utter emotional depletion.

Luke reached out and put his arms around Huff, embracing the only father figure he'd ever really known the way only Biggs' best friend could in such a personal, awkward moment. Sound slowly emerged from the electric buzzing in Huff's ears as he began to hear the wind rustling past his clothing wraps, catching the coarse hair of his beard.

The older man struggled somewhat unsuccessfully to regain his composure. "Thank you, Luke, for coming." He looked at young man fondly, like he did his own children. "You two were more like brothers than any two I've ever seen. When he learned something new about the condensers, or flying his 'hopper, all he wanted to do was shoot over to your uncle's place and fill you in."

Suddenly the anguish was wiped away by a fresh, new concern. "Luke, you aren't safe here. There's a permanent detachment of Imperial troops here now. They were looking for you in Anchorhead, and out at your uncle's place. Son, they . . ."

Luke stopped him. "I know." He nodded his head. "I know what they did. I saw it." A moment of silence passed between them. "Are Windy and Deak OK? What about Camie and Fixer?"

The Sandtrooper's Story

“They were questioned and shaken up a bit, but they’re all fine. Well, Fixer had a bad accident out on a canyon speed run, but he’s recovering. He was out for quite a while, but is back at the power station now. His ‘hopper’s gone, though; nothing left but scrap.”

“That must have been some accident.”

Huff nodded, “It was. He and Windy were racing and he got caught in a downdraft that pushed him right into Windy’s ‘hopper. They both went down out near the Stone Needle.”

Luke was visibly shaken and filled with concern and maybe just a bit of desire to be back racing the canyons again. Huff put a hand on Luke’s shoulder, smiling kindly. “You know you aren’t safe here, and yet still you come see me. You’re a fine son, Luke.” He paused a moment. “What was it those troops were looking for?”

Luke looked up. “It’s a long, complicated story, but they were looking for a ‘droid my uncle bought, and since I was the one out with it, they were looking for me too.”

A cool gust of wind blew around them. Luke looked off to the horizon in the direction of his uncle’s farm. “Is the harvest under way yet?”

Huff nodded, looking up into the blue sky. “Starts tomorrow. Winter’s coming whether we want it or not.”

Luke nodded knowingly. “I should go. I know you’re busy getting ready for it.”

Huff turned to look at Luke. “That is tomorrow’s business. Come inside and have something to eat with us before you leave.”

* * *

I noticed the thick smell of various medications and disinfectants hanging in the still air as we all weighed what Holder had just said.

“People get themselves killed every hour of every day in the Outer Rim worlds. I have to admit, I was wondering what made this murder so special.” said Felth.

A small pump beside the bed switched on for a few seconds, then off as Rogue shook his head in amazement. “Killing a Hutt is no small thing, no pun intended. Jabba and the rest of the clan would never let that go quietly. If they even suspected Black Sun was behind it . . .”

“There’d have been a small war fought between them” I said, finishing Rogue’s sentence. He nodded in agreement.

The Sandtrooper's Story

Blade was scanning the screen of his field holonet pack, his thumb scrolling through screen after screen. "I don't see any record of a *Matalla the Hutt* anywhere."

Holder turned his head toward Blade, then cut his eyes to Rogue, "You won't. From what I learned, Jabba kept his '*brother*' hidden, as he was a bit of an embarrassment both personally and to the whole of the Hutt clan."

"Embarrassment or not, there would have been immediate and bloody retaliation against Xizor, Kaird and all of Black Sun if they had known what we know" countered Rogue.

Felth impatiently blurted out, "You know, this information is twenty years old. Why do we care about it? There was no war between the Hutts and Black Sun and the clan doesn't seem overly concerned over Matalla's disappearance."

Holder became visibly concerned and agitated now. "We should care about it because I picked up Kaird's embedded tracking signature two days ago on my armor's signal receiver. Everyone that was on base at the dig site had one, but nobody uses them anymore. I doubt Kaird even remembers it's in that skull of his. I've been watching for changes but there hasn't been one. Just before we headed out to where Watcher's body was dumped, the Port Authority contacted me about someone taking an interest in Kaird's ship. They confirmed that Xizor's personal 'droid assistant, Guri had arrived and had made an inquiry about it. Both of them knew what Watcher knew, and one of them killed the crazy old guy looking for it."

He looked across at Rogue, handing him the small signal tracker. "I know they're both here searching for the recording; it's the only thing common to them both. For some reason it must have become important again, and make no mistake about it; either will kill to find it and keep it secure once they do."

Etz leaned closer to Holder, "Why did you say '*brother*' that way?"

I was turning away from the bedside, stepping toward a 'droid busily cleaning the empty autopsy table as I interjected the answer. "He did that because Hutts are hermaphroditic."

Etz and Blade stared blankly at each other, then turned, twisting their heads to look at me as Rogue and Holder nodded knowingly.

Doc Shurte, who had been standing behind me listening, stepped forward into the empty space I had vacated, interjecting at this point. "A hermaphroditic animal is one that has both male and female reproductive organs and sexual characteristics. Basically, a Hutt's apparent gender comes from a conscious decision made by each individual Hutt as to which gender it identifies with."

"Didn't see that coming" commented Blade.

"Didn't *want* to see *that* coming" commented Etz.

The Sandtrooper's Story

There was a moment of silence as the doctor adjusted one of the monitors, and checked a connection on Holder's chest. "Let's let him get some rest. We can continue this conversation over there" he said, indicating a young woman working at a desk across the room near the morgue drawers.

We all filed away from the bed as Holder closed his eyes and the doctor drew the curtain around the bed.

One of the student archaeologists was seated at the desk, silently cataloguing a recent find. Felth sat down on the corner, flipping the power switch of his blaster on and off, on and off impatiently. When she continued working, quite unimpressed, he stood up abruptly and walked through the door to the waiting area.

Rogue spoke to Blade as they walked toward the desk. "Have 4120 and 0600 pay a visit to the Port Authority. They've developed such a wonderful rapport with that office now. I want 1265 keeping a visual on both Kaird and Guri's ships."

Blade nodded as he stopped beside the desk, leaning in close to Rogue. He didn't realize I could hear. "I can do that sir, but may I offer the services of my '*shadow*'? At the moment, she's laying low at the Dowager Queen with nothing to do, and she has no discernable ties to any of us. It also keeps 1265 free for us to use."

Rogue considered the suggestion, then quietly replied. "Can you trust her?"

Blade looked away momentarily, then back to Rogue. "I trust her, sir."

"Do it" replied Rogue. "We're going to need to move on this fast and find it first."

The student spoke up, keeping her attention on the relic in her hands. "If you're looking for something old out there, we can help." She looked up. "It's what we do. If it's a dead Bantha you're looking for, we've been looking for their graveyard as part of our study. We could work together."

Rogue looked at me, then to the student, then over to the doctor. "Doc, they'll be working with us for a while."

He shifted his attention back to the student. "OK, kid let's get your group together out front. We've got a lot of work to do."

I leaned closer to Blade as we walked toward the door. "Your shadow is here? When did that happen?"

He looked back at me. "I uncovered her in the marketplace. It isn't common knowledge to anyone but Rogue, and now you. Keep it to yourself, OK Deck?"

The Sandtrooper's Story

I nodded silently.

Rogue headed through the door to the front of the building and we followed him out. I paused at the doorway, turning back. "Doc, keep that old man's corpse on ice and protected in case we need him."

He nodded, glancing back to the drawer that contained Watcher's body, his forehead creased with growing concern.

* * *

Luke lifted R2 over a rockslide that blocked the already rough path to Kenobi's home. The little astromech bleeped his thanks. His lateral hover jets had been removed years earlier by the director of the labor pool onboard the Tantive IV when he had been re-fitted with tool arms for certain mission specific duties. If it was possible for a 'droid to miss something, he surely missed his jets.

He waddled after his new master as he entered the stone dwelling. The twin suns had already set and the sky overhead which had been ablaze with staccato streaks of oranges and purples, set against the dark blue sky was now fading into blackness, pinpricked with starlight.

Luke closed and bolted the door behind the little 'droid and walked into the darkness of the main room. Nothing had been disturbed since his last visit. Slowly he sat down in the spot Ben had occupied on that tumultuous day they met, and rested his head back against the stone wall. A wind gust whistled from around the door, breaking the silence. The stone building felt so empty with Ben gone, so much smaller now, as did most of his old life. His closest childhood friend was gone too. Biggs had always been the big brother figure for him, and he missed that. He was angry at having been robbed of the opportunity to have great adventures with him; all those adventures he had dreamed of while staring off into the countless sunsets over the years.

Pushing those thoughts back in his mind, he stood, making his way to the back room, where Kenobi's modest bed sat neatly made. He sat down on the firm surface, rolled onto it, and stretched his legs. In his hand was the small cube-shaped holocron Ben had left for him.

At that moment, the little 'droid rolled into the room and beside the bed, making a small nervous scraping noise. Luke closed his eyes and allowed his neck muscles to relax as his head sank deeper into the pillow. "We'll head out there tomorrow R2. Go out into the main room and power down to sentry mode, OK?"

R2 bleeped again, whirling in a tight circle and scooting away into the darkness.

"That's right; big day tomorrow."

The Sandtrooper's Story

The rest of the muscles in Luke's body slowly relaxed, and he drifted into a deep and much needed sleep.

* * *

Snow blasted across the nose of the ship as Solo maneuvered his Y-wing through the whiteout conditions of the blizzard blasting the surface of Hoth. His face, dimly illuminated in the small, dark cockpit by the instruments, revealed his elevated level of concentration. He would rather fly by sight any day, but he found himself needing to dust off his old skills and fly by instruments only, as he made his way toward the encrypted beacon heading and the obscure base the rebels were building.

Slowly out of the darkness and speeding fury of the Hoth night came the dim glow of the cavern entrance and open shield doors of the base. He cut his engines and extended the landing gear as he passed through the doors, drifting noiselessly through them on his repulsor field into the slot designated for his ship.

Ice that had formed across the Y-wing's skin cracked and fell away as he pushed open the cockpit of the fighter. Dack slid by, rotated slightly, and set down his X-wing down in the open slot alongside Wedge's shredded bird.

As the two pilots powered down all systems, members of the flight crew that were still on duty moved quickly beneath both ships. They scraped the ice away from the metal skin where it covered power and fuel ports, and connected the necessary feed lines.

One of the deckhands moved out from beneath the Y-wing, secured a ladder to the side of the ship just beneath the cockpit, then turned and gave a nod and thumbs up to a tech inside the control room along one side of the hangar. Moments later, as Solo descended the ladder, the massive outer shield doors lurched with the sound of metal scraping on metal as they began to slowly creep closed.

He unzipped the front of his orange flight suit as his eyes moved to Dack's ship where Toryn Farr was waiting for the young pilot to climb down to her. His eyes darted to Wedge's ship, and then to the empty slot where Luke's should have been. The Corellian smuggler pulled his arms free of the flight suit, folded it down, and tied the sleeves around his waist half wishing the Princess had been waiting for him.

He still wasn't sure exactly how he had ended up here, but at least no bounty hunters had caught up to him yet. The time would come when he could no longer wait, and would have to settle things with Jabba properly, Princess or not. He shot a sideways glance to the crew member working on his ship. "Where is Lu . . ." he stopped himself. "I mean Commander Skywalker's fighter?"

The Sandtrooper's Story

The tech continued screwing shut a small control panel on the underside of the engine, answering Solo without looking. “The word that trickled down to us from General Rieekan was not to expect him.”

“Rieekan huh?”

Han sharply turned and caught sight of Dack and Torynn walking away together, talking quietly. He watched the pair as they disappeared into a dark hallway on the far side of the hangar. Pushing thoughts of Leia to the back of his mind, he hastily exited, heading down the narrow winding ice corridor that led to the Command Center.

As he disappeared from sight, high up on the opposing cavern wall there was movement in one of the small control rooms. A figure moved out of the shadows and stepped toward the transparisteel. Leia Organa watched Captain Solo through her own reflection. When he could no longer be seen, she dropped her eyes and leaned her head against the pane, rolling uneasy thoughts over in her mind. Abruptly, her eyes flicked up and she stepped back, disappearing once again into the shadows.

* * *

Zu was the last one of the small archaeological team in, and she closed the door to the small bunk room. The evening winds were kicking up, and a spray of sand had blown in across the floor. She walked past her friends to her trunk, stripping off her jacket and shirt.

Ashkii stowed some of the heavier gear away as Daegan paced back and forth, his thoughts churning into words. “What the hell were you thinking, telling Imperial troops we’d help them?”

Erek slid the sun visor back off his eyes and chimed in from where he reclined in his bunk, “Yeah, what made you think you could speak for all of us?”

Even Miren was frustrated with her team mate “Come on Alina, you need to think, girl. I don’t like the idea of getting involved with them.”

‘Lina looked up from the artifact she was cataloguing, shot a harsh glare at Miren, and addressed the room in general, “You guys, I don’t like it any more than you do, but the one thing that flashed through my head while they were talking was that these troops have resources we would never have access to. Helping them helps us. If we find the graveyard together, it’s a huge coup for our team, and they find whatever it is they’re after.”

Ashkii leaned against the wall, “Do you even know what it is they’re after?”

‘Lina rolled her eyes, “Does it really matter, Ash?”

The Sandtrooper's Story

Zu pulled a shirt on and sat down on her bunk, “Yeah, it could matter a lot. Looking for the graveyard on our own is one thing. Dragging Imperial troops across the sands looking for it is another. Imperial Troops ‘Lina! Are you crazy? Whatever it is they’re searching for could be really dangerous.”

Bem, who had been quietly standing in the shadows of the corner listening, interjected. “You know, it’s not what any of us would ideally want, but ‘Lina’s right. This does help us.”

A frustrated Daegan threw his goggles across the room to his bunk. “Come on, Bem. You know we don’t need any attention, especially from the local law enforcement.”

Bem shifted his stance. “The rest of us aren’t necessarily squeaky clean, I know, but I think what you mean to say is that YOU don’t need the extra attention.”

Daegan’s eyes narrowed a bit as he stared across the room at Bem. “That’s no secret. Everyone knows why I wanted this location.”

Bem stood a bit taller, slipping his own goggles into a baggy pocket on his thigh. “That may be, but you’re the only one on the team that’s hanging out in the Outer Rim because things got too hot at home.”

Daegan’s eyes darted from face to face around the dim room. “You’re hanging out with me. We all agreed this was a great hiding place for me to lay low where we could also get some decent work done. Nobody entertained the idea of partnering with Imperial troops until now!” He turned his head, and directed his glare toward ‘Lina.

It was at that moment that the door burst open and Doc Shurte hurried through, sand blowing and wind howling in the darkness behind him. The old man closed the door quickly and turned, glancing around the room at the troubled faces.

“Ah, yes. I thought there might be a bit of unrest in here.” He walked toward the center of the room and came to stop between Bem and Daegan, turning to look at the latter. “Son, I wouldn’t let you do this if I thought there was a problem. I promised my sister that you and your friends would be safe here.”

Daegan turned away, pointing at ‘Lina. “That’s great, but she’s all but delivered me to the Empire!”

Doc looked around the room, over his glasses, as he spoke, “I can tell you something is up. These troops aren’t following a normal Imperial protocol. If they had been, they would’ve never sought my help for their comrade in the bed inside. Under proper protocol, the circumstances under which I came to be needed would have surely meant Holder’s evacuation from this place for de-briefing at the very least.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

The doc lifted the glasses from the bridge of his nose as he rubbed the skin where they had been resting. “No, I believe these troops are operating outside the realm of the Empire, and have very little, if any, interest in you. With that said, ‘Lina threw the barn door wide open when she volunteered to help them. They’ll be back in a few days geared up and ready to go.’”

He replaced his glasses, looking through them at Daegan. “The best thing you can do now, my boy . . . is get some rest . . . and help them.”

*