

Chapter 21 – Fate and the Shifting Sands

In the six or so weeks that had followed the crash in the canyon, things had calmed a bit around the spaceport. Our sweeps of the city and visits to the outlying moisture farms continued on in relative mundane tedium. Although the farmers were usually surprised, they were generally always happy to see us actually following through on our promises to be a presence in the region.

Rogue had spoken with Darklighter, and discovered that he too was the victim of sabotage and theft. Not only were his ‘vaporators being damaged and drained of their water, crops were being stolen from his hydroponic gardens as well. Supplies from his company warehouses had also been rifled through and some small items taken. If he was behind the issues we were investigating for the moisture farmers, he had been very careful to cover his tracks.

On several occasions, while showing me the best places to find ‘droid parts, I had engaged the Hammerhead, Nadon, in conversations about General Kenobi, but had learned precious little more than I had already uncovered. Kenobi, Luke and the ‘droids carrying the secret data were all intertwined somehow. If I wanted to know more about the man, and why he would have left with a local farmboy and the ‘droids we were hunting, I had to find his home. I had a theory, untested as of yet, that involved the electronic signature of a moisture ‘vaporator’s condenser motor. If they had a strong enough signature to be read by the instruments on the Sentinel, I could use it to perform sweeps over the stony canyons of the Jundland wastes to search for Kenobi’s home. It wasn’t much, but if it worked, it might just be the best lead I had.

4120 and Etz had made several trips to Bestine to check on the status of the injured kids. Windy had recovered completely and been discharged with no memory of the Tusken abduction, but Deak and Fixer remained under the constant supervision of several med ‘droids. Fixer was definitely the worse of the two, with several broken ribs, a leg broken in three places, and multiple lacerations to the face and limbs. He also had yet to regain consciousness for more than a few seconds since the accident.

Deak had regained consciousness after about a week and had been recovering slowly, his own broken bones and torn muscles being regenerated daily in the therapy sessions with the ‘droids. The swelling and black eyes had faded, but the bandages and tenderness surrounding his now-straightened nose remained. He had improved dramatically, however, and could soon be released.

Camie had barely left Fixer since the crash, and had sworn she would be at his side when he awoke. The doctor assured her it was only a matter of time before that happened, once the slight internal swelling in his head had gone down sufficiently to relieve the pressure on his brain.

Back at base, in Mos Eisley, we had still not come to a decision about the imprisoned Commando, much to Etz’ discontent. The agreement to disagree as to the troopers’ fate had been one of quiet informality. One day had turned into two, which became a week, which had turned into several weeks. Etz had given up hope, switched off the repulsor field generator embedded in the carbonite and propped the prisoner up on an angle against the wall at the end of our bunkroom.

Ddraig and I had been trying unsuccessfully for four days to bring the damaged astromech online, having burned out two power sources while trying to figure out the wiring scheme. We were confident that we had worked through the errors and were ready to try once again. 1265 was in the 'fresher, Topolev was on his bunk sipping cool water as he cleaned his E-11 and Etz was almost asleep on his as we worked. Rogue, Falker and 4120 were in the front office and Danz and Blade were out on a patrol.

I sat on my bunk and connected the 'droids wiring harness to the power cells as Ddraig, sitting on his bunk on the opposite side of the little 'droid, flipped on the small fusion furnace to jump-start the circuits. He looked over at me, I nodded to him, "All set here, go ahead." He pressed and released the momentary contact switch on the fusion furnace, sending a pulse through the 'droids circuits. Lights flickered on the front of the dome, which swiveled with a whirring sound a quarter turn to the right and stopped.

A slight curl of smoke issued from the front vents and a piercingly loud tone screamed out of the audio processors immediately followed by a pulse wave that shattered the container Topolev was drinking from and sent a chest-pounding concussion wave throughout the building.

Ddraig and I were shielding our faces as the sound subsided and the 'droid powered itself off. "What the hell was that?" I asked. Ddraig shrugged his shoulders as the three from the front room raced through the door, "What was that?" asked Rogue.

"I have no idea", I said, "we're trying to find out now." I checked the new power cells, "They're fine." I looked over at Ddraig, "What happened?" He was checking the fusion furnace, which had switched off, "I'm not sure, it doesn't look like it was the furnace."

As he spoke, Etz sat up on his bunk, "Look!" He was pointing across the room. The carbonite block had been shoved several feet along the wall and slammed into the corner by the strong push of the sonic blast. A yellow, oval light panel situated along the edge of the prisoner containment unit was blinking rapidly on and off as the internal systems came online and began the countdown to rapid thaw and carbonite liquification.

Fate had made our choice for us.

Suddenly, the room was flooded in a pale orange glow from the silvery metal slab as the thin carbonite covering the commando's face began to heat up and split open. Where the cracks occurred, blinding beams of white light streamed out into the room, becoming brighter as the fissures on the metallic surface widened. We all shielded our eyes as we heard the high-pitched whistling sound of the sizzling carbonite melting off of the deep-frozen surface of the prisoner beneath, flowing away into small puddles on the floor, instantly cooling and re-solidifying.

As quickly as the process had begun, it ended. The whining whistle subsided, and the glow receded as the thin, icy shroud covering the trooper melted and steamed away as his body was forced through the quick-thaw process. His limp, armored body slipped forward, out of the

remains of his carbonite cocoon, and he slumped to a heap on the floor. Convulsive spasms rocked his body, and his head and limbs shook uncontrollably as his eyes rolled back in his head.

Rogue, 4120 and 0600 lifted the convulsing trooper into the nearest spare bunk as Falker grabbed the blanket from the end of Danz' bunk and draped it over him. As they fought to keep him from shaking himself off the bunk, dogtags hanging from a chain around his neck slipped out. Etz reached up, wrapped the chain around his right hand and snapped it off the Commando's neck.

With his left arm holding the trooper down, he held up the other up, opening his palm, revealing the upside down tag. He rotated it around to read:

HOLDER
6th Battalion
501st Legion

A second tag fell out from behind the first reading:

Tatooine Coring Project

“He's one of us! It says HOLDER, 6th Battalion, 501st Legion. He was part of the Tatooine Coring Project.”

Falker grabbed the straps off his gearbag and clipped one end to one side of the bunk and stretched them across the Commando's chest and arms to the other side, adjusting it tighter into a makeshift restraint, “Ddraig, grab some other straps. These convulsions are normal, but he might hurt himself if he's not restrained. We need to get the doc from Bestine to check him out. The unusually long deep freeze might warrant more help than we know how to give.”

“Sure” replied Ddraig as he grabbed the straps off his bag and mine. Falker took them, securing the thighs and calves of the convulsing trooper, “He's in bad shape guys. Actually, I'm surprised he's alive at all. Well, now we don't have the question of IF we should let him out, but rather what to do with him now that he IS out.” He flashed a glance to everyone standing around the room, “*Holder* is out of the carbonite, but he's far from out of danger.

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The doctor had two medical bags open and was busy placing electrodes on the shaking trooper, conducting several tests, as we stood around in the front office. *Holder* had made it through the night without incident, although there were moments of struggling against the restraints and barely coherent ramblings about traitors and how they would be sorry for their actions, as if he were reliving a moment from his past.

We had removed the upper armor pieces to allow for the doctors tests and had discovered that Holder's upper limbs were severely withered and atrophied from inactivity. If he survived the

first week, and his mental functions came back in line with reality, he could begin a physical reconditioning shortly thereafter, but it would take time to gain his strength back.

Ddraig was at the holonet port reading messages while the rest of us stood around waiting. I had two logic units and some tools in my hand and wasn't due for a patrol for several hours. As the others talked quietly and peered into the bunk room, I stepped out the front portal to the streets and walked around the side of the building through the narrow alley to the courtyard in back. I walked over and sat on the edge of the loading dock in back, pulling off my helmet and setting it beside me. I took in a nostril full of the hot, dry air and positioned myself in the shade of the overhang with my 'droid work.

As I worked, focused on the electronics in my hand, a dark-robed figure approached through the shadows of the alleyway. It was almost upon me when I noticed it and looked up. It was the Kubaz, Garindan. He began making squeaking noises as he spoke to me. I motioned for him to wait and pulled my helmet back on, switching on the translator unit. He began again, "Many sorrows for your fallen friend, back at bay 94." I nodded my head as he continued, "Although Tyrell obstructed your ability to keep the *Millennium Falcon* from departing, I was hoping to perhaps receive a small amount of spice for my work performed. Rogue promised he would pay in spice for my services."

I responded, "I'll speak to him about it." Garindan nodded and began to turn away when I stopped him, "In your time here, did you ever have the need or chance to discover the whereabouts of the hermit's home?" The dark figure stopped and turned back, "No" he squawked, "I was following him once to see where he went, and suddenly found myself in a different place, unsure how I had gotten there, with a dull throbbing in my head. The hermit was nowhere to be found." I laughed under my breath, Jedi mind trick.

I went back to work and Garindan lingered a few moments until he was sure I needed nothing more, and then he disappeared into the alley. I pulled my helmet off when he was gone. A wind blew through the courtyard, spraying sand against the base of the loading dock below my dangling boots. It was a hot wind, but wind nonetheless.

I couldn't stop wondering what had caused the sonic wave. There was no damage to the 'droid or the fusion charger. Once I had these logic processor units rewired and ready to install, I would run a diagnostic check on the power-up protocol code. It was as if the 'droid had been told to emit the wave and then power itself off. As I worked, I realized that check might be a few days off though. These logic units were going to take some time. The pin configuration was much smaller than my tools. I would have to pick up a finer set to be able to proceed any further. While I was out, I would see about capturing the electronic signature of one of the moisture 'vaporators on the street.

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The suns rose and fell 12 times, cycling across the arid sands of Tatooine, and Holder seemed to be improving. His nightmares came less frequently now, and the tremors had lessened in intensity, but there was still no coherent speech, no direct eye contact. The doc was worried that

he might not recover from the insanely long freeze, but his estimates of a week's initial recovery period were based on normal encasement increments. This case took everything he knew about hibernation sickness and tossed them in the dunes. He took notes religiously on Holder's condition and improvements for possible future medical journaling.

Rogue and 4120 had announced several days ago that Davin Felth had been installed as our unit's intelligence officer. He spent a great deal of time on the holonet collecting information about the identities of anyone known to be in the Outer Rim territories that was wanted by the Empire. He was deeply engrossed in his work, studying the faces and profiles until he knew them all. He seemed to like the work and take it very seriously, but something was off a bit about Felth. I couldn't put my finger on it, but ever since the day I had startled him as he checked his holonet account, something just didn't click the way it should. Some of the other guys seemed to have similar feelings, but had not said anything to Felth or Rogue yet. I guess maybe they thought he was just sucking up to make an impression with his new CO.

Work had continued on the astromech, and we had gotten a lot done. The new tools I found for the logic units had worked well, and the systems were successfully installed. A few more days of diagnostic checks and we would be ready for another power-up attempt, most likely in the rear courtyard though, not inside again. It was mid-afternoon and hot. Etz and I were finishing up our patrol of the spaceport and on our way back to base when I saw Mamow Nadon talking with a pilot just outside Chalmun's Cantina.

I clicked my chin switch, "You go on ahead, I'll be along in a minute. I need to talk to the Hammerhead." Etz nodded his bucket and kept moving as I crossed the sandy street. Nadon dropped several credits in the pilot's waiting palm and was handed a small drawstring bag. He turned to go and caught sight of me approaching, "Officer Deckard, what can I do for you?" I motioned for him to follow me into the alley as I turned my head and checked the street in both directions. He followed me around the side of the Cantina. "I think I've found a way to search for Kenobi's home, and I want you to come with me when I go looking." He blinked and responded, his dual mouths uttering his stereo response, "What is your plan? He was a man that intentionally kept a low profile. He did not want to be found." I pulled out a small device from one of my belt pouches and held up the display for him to see as I pressed and held a small button on the side. There was a pattern of waves fluctuating across the small screen and a mid-level pulsing sound. "This is the pulse-wave signature of a moisture 'vaporator's condenser motor. All 'vaporators have them, I checked. While there is any number of condenser motors, from different manufacturers, they all pulse at exactly this frequency." The waves continued to dance across the screen, until I released the button and slipped the device back on my belt. I looked up at him, "I'm going to calibrate the sensors in our Drop Ship to sweep for this signal. You told me if you had to guess, he lived somewhere in the hills of the Jundland Wastes, and that he had a 'vaporator for water. Now we have a way to search for it."

Nadon nodded his head approvingly, "Excellent idea. I would be happy to accompany you. When did you want to begin looking?"

“Tonight. I need to know more about this man. If Lord Vader decides to come back here and deal with us for allowing Kenobi to slip away, I want to have more information about where he may have been heading, and why the boy was with him.”

“Tonight it is then. Where should we meet?”

“Right here. That’s the ship we’ll be taking, there” and I pointed out into the courtyard to the Sentinel. I’ll be back here once the suns have set.” He nodded and began to walk away as I stopped him, “What’s in the bag?”

“Seeds from my home planet. They just arrived. I can’t wait to plant them, to have a little piece of home.” and he walked away as several Cantina patrons came wandering around the corner and down the alley. They passed me, and I walked out to cross the street to the barracks.

There was a crowd in the Command Center as I entered from street, pulling off my bucket, “What’s going on?” Falker turned his head to me, “Holder’s starting to talk.” I walked past Ddraig, who was reading a holonet message, and stepped through the open doorway into the bunkroom. I moved past Blade and 0600 and dropped my pack on my bunk, catching site of Holder through the crowd of bodies that surrounded him.

His grey eyes darted around the room, and his words came in hoarse bursts that appeared difficult, and almost painful.

“Who are you? My vision is blurry as hell, but I’ve never seen armor like that before. Did you kill the rest of them, or are you going to get in the way too?”

“Kill who? Get in the way of what?” said Topolev.

He raised his sweaty, quivering head and neck off the pillow and yelled, “The Jedi! I have to kill the General . . . Obi-Wan Kenobi. He’s here, now on this planet! I’m not sure who you are, but you troops are just as much the traitors my squad mates were if you keep me confined.”

Ddraig spoke up, walking in from the Command Center, “You’ve been in a Carbonite block for the past 20 years. The reason you don’t recognize our armor isn’t because of your fuzzy vision, it’s because it is the evolved version of your gear.” Holder blinked his burning eyes as the room fell silent, all eyes on him. He tried to calm himself as the implications of the bombshell sunk in. A thin layer of cold sweat beaded up across his skin, and he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. Twenty years gone. He looked from face to face around the room, trying to catch a glimmer of real truth to cling to through the haze.

Ddraig continued as Holder calmed a bit, “General Kenobi is already dead. Now that the holonet connection has been synched up again, I received an old message from my friend, TK1999, at Imperial Center on Coruscant. Lord Vader killed Jedimaster Kenobi in a lightsaber duel.” Fuzzy memories of his past sharpened and came into focus once again, as if it were yesterday, “Who is Lord Vader?”

Rogue stepped forward, “Lord Vader is the right hand of the Emperor.” 0600 questioned Holder from the back of the room, “How were your squad-mates traitors?” Holder trembled, “They kept me from killing that Jedi scum when I had the chance.” Rogue remained silent for a moment, thinking . . . looking around, “Every trooper in this room is loyal to the Empire. Tell us what happened to you.”

Holder took a breath with eyes closed. The memories were still congealing into coherent thoughts in his head as he began, “Bear with me. I’m still trying to adjust to the time slip. I was part of a team of Republic Commandos that was activated near the end of the Clone Wars. About a month in, the Emperor issued Order 66, making all Jedi Knights enemies of the Empire. Understand, until Order 66 came down, we had been working, fighting and dying alongside the Jedi. Suddenly, they were the enemy. I never questioned Palpatine’s decree. It just never occurred to me to question whether or not my unit felt the same.

The Emperor’s Clone army was an amazing fighting force, but we all continued to age too rapidly. The Kaminoan cloners had created a serum that would reset the aging process to a normal pace, but had never made it available. They wanted to continue cranking out wave after wave of clones, satisfying not only the initial order from JediMaster Sifo Dyas, but new, lucrative orders from the Emperor as well. Palpatine demanded the serum, and the Kaminoans hid it, denying its existence

Many rumors began to circulate about troops that actually ignored Order 66, refusing to fight the Jedi, and were subsequently rounded up to be dealt with. The problem with this was that many troops who were loyal to the Empire, like me, were also included in the roundups simply because of their clone vat lot numbers. A small group of us escaped under the leadership of Kal Skirata, the Mandalorian trainer of the Commandos. He wanted to find the serum and use it as leverage for more money from the Empire. Working together, we managed to find the Kaminoans and their age-reversion serum. Kal administered it to everyone in our group. He had to know that it worked.

For some, the changes were immediate. They began vomiting, followed by violent, bone-snapping seizures and then death. Those of us that didn’t exhibit any of the symptoms were lucky, although we still live with the constant unknown of what might yet happen to us as a result of that inoculation. Those remaining made it safely away, only to have bounty hunters, under orders from the Emperor to locate the serum, pursue us. Most of us escaped a second capture. Kal was not so fortunate.

He was captured, encased in carbonite, returned to Coruscant and placed in the Emperor’s prisoner garden.” Holder saw the expressions on the faces around the room, “Yeah, that’s right, the Emperor has a garden of prisoners sealed in carbonite slabs which he visits often. These prisoners had no hope of ever being released, and were therefore used as . . . ghoulishly artistic reminders of the futility of fighting against the absolute power of the Empire.

Knowing that we could never go back into the mainstream clone population again, and not sure of how we might have seriously altered ourselves, we intercepted a transmission and assumed a troop assignment to locate here and oversee the closing of the Pit. The Outer Rim became the

best choice in case something was ever to go wrong with us.

As part of the protocols for closing the coring project down, Slicer, Torch, Jumper and I were removing some survey equipment in the canyons of the Jundlad Wastes. That location had been scouted initially for the presence of the specific ore that was needed. The original crew didn't want to have to locate the dig site operations on this side of the planet if it wasn't absolutely necessary. They knew the locals would all but lynch them if they did, but several small readings had been picked up on the scanners when the initial sweeps were made. Between the Raider and Jawa populations here, they would have been lucky to keep the machinery in one piece and running to get the job done."

O600 interjected, "Who are Slicer, Torch and Jumper?"

"They are, I mean were, some of the members of my team. Being clones, we were all given names that best embodied our jobs and abilities. Slicer was a great systems hacker. Torch . . . well you get the idea. I was given the name HOLDER because I was the Holder of information, details and secrets, about the mission and about the men I served with.

We were breaking down the equipment and loading it up when it happened. It was late afternoon, and the suns had been damn hot that day. We were on the last ridge of hills before the Dune Sea. Jumper happened to notice a small ship that had set down in the sand at its edge. The ship's canopy had been left open and whoever had been inside had left recently. My helmet scanners were still able to pick up mild thermal readings from the engines. We finished loading our gear and carefully trailed down the cliff and around into the canyon, so as not to be detected.

As we came closer, the ship's class and markings clearly identified it as a Jedi Starfighter. I immediately called for backup on my helmet comm as we moved in closer. Others from the second and third survey groups quickly convened at our survey site and made their way down to where we were. As the others joined us, we fanned out to try and locate the pilot. With all the Temple Knights that had been killed across the galaxy, it was possible it wasn't a Jedi, but rather someone who had assumed ownership under questionable circumstances. We had made our way up into the hills when we saw a cloaked figure hurrying toward the ship.

The reinforcements, who were closer to the sandy bottom of the hill, approached him issuing orders to halt. The figure turned suddenly, extending his arm toward them, violently throwing the troopers back with an invisible push. Immediately we knew we were dealing with a Force-sensitive at the very least, and judging by his cloaks, most likely a fully trained Jedi Knight.

We all opened fire on him as he turned, again running toward his ship. Any doubts as to who the pilot was were wiped away when the Jedi drew his blue-bladed lightsaber with lightning reflexes to block the deadly bolts as he ran. He did so without so much as looking back, deflecting the first round of incoming blaster fire away, taking down two of our troops in the process. The winds, which had been gusting all afternoon, began to pick up strength considerably, blowing the sand across the ground in a fine haze, and the Jedi's robes as he settled into a comfortable, centered stance.

More blaster fire erupted, which he again deflected. As I ran down the rocky hillside, adrenaline was pounding through me as I rushed to engage the fugitive Knight. I reached to my belt and drew my own hilt, igniting the crimson blade of a Jedi Hunter's lightsaber. As I drew, three others also ignited their blades as they fired on him again. The others in my group and several in the support groups failed to draw or advance.

As he fluidly whirled, sweeping his sword in wide, circling arcs and deflecting the blaster fire, his blade sizzled and crackled, vaporizing the flying sand in small hissing sparks along its entire length. The expression I saw on his face clearly showed that he had not anticipated the emergence of our blades into the mix of the fight. I pulled off my helmet as I ran and threw myself at the Jedi. He caught my blade on his and rolled it away, thrusting me away with a strong Force-push as he made another wide arc deflecting yet more blaster fire.

The other Commandos with swords advanced, pulled off their helmets and jumped into the fight as they circled around him. I had regained my feet and re-joined the fight, my blade flashing and sparking as it made contact with his, only to find that the strength behind his blade was amazing. Obi-Wan Kenobi was now moving at blurred speeds, rolling and parrying every slice and chop we dished out when suddenly more blaster fire erupted, taking off the armored sword arm of the trooper next to me!

As he fell to the sand screaming, I whirled around to see the other troops, my squad-mates included, firing on us. A bolt sizzled past my ear, and I dove into the sand and rolled behind a sizeable rock as more bolts streaked by. The Jedi waved his free hand, using the Force to pick up and hurl several boulders toward the troops before he realized they were fighting on his side. Even with what was left of the newfound support he was surrounded.

I grabbed my blaster and squeezed off several shots, taking out the traitorous troops from the support survey teams. I couldn't believe troops from my own unit were now fighting against me and alongside the Jedi. One of the other Imperial swordsmen drew back his arm, crouched and hurled his lightsaber end over end through the air, slicing through Jumper's midsection and decapitating Torch. Slicer jumped behind a rock as the thrown lightsaber fell to the sand just short of him and switched off. I dove out from behind my rock reaching for the saber hilt as Slicer also crawled out to retrieve it.

My hand closed around it, and I pulled my own red blade up sharply, bisecting Slicer's E-11. He fell back away from me as I rolled to a stance and glaring at him, turned and threw the sword hilt back to its owner. I lowered my blade to Slicer's throat and ripped the lightsaber from his belt, clipping it on my own, "You don't deserve to carry this!"

It was now three against one, and Slicer had been removed from the equation. The others continued to aggressively attack, wearing the Jedi down a bit in the extreme heat until one of the others was able to squarely land a kick to his face as the others engaged him. Two troopers then brought their swords down hard across the Jedi's, knocking it from his grip and sending it flying away into the sand. A trooper quickly planted his foot on top of it to keep it from being recalled to the Knight's hand.

Another trooper slashed at Obi-Wan, but he jumped up and away, tucking into a roll that landed him on his feet. Unfortunately it landed him squarely in the path of another kick to the chest which sent him reeling backward until he stumbled and fell into the sand, rolling over onto his belly.

The wind was blowing furiously now. He lifted his head from the sand, his hair whipping crazily as he clenched his teeth and lifted both hands, fingers spread wide, parallel to the ground. As the wailing wind rose to a fever pitch, he opened his mouth in a silent scream. The sound was sucked up by the roaring wind, as he drew on every ounce of strength he had, summoning the Force within him and within the landscape around him as he heard the instructions from an old lesson echoing from Masters Yoda and Qui Gon, "Even between the land and the ship."

I felt an electric energy wash over me as every grain of sand within a 300 meter radius of Obi-Wan was suddenly hurled upward by the Force into the howling wind, resulting in a blinding sandstorm of cover. He rolled away as the screaming winds carried the sand in a swirling, Force-induced vortex. We were all instantly blinded as the flying sand bit into the exposed skin of our faces. We had taken off our helmets to fight, and had lost our vision as a result. He pulled his hood over his head and reached out again with the Force, throwing aside the trooper that stood on his lightsaber as it was pulled to his hand. As soon as it landed in his palm, he stood and made his way through the blinding sandstorm to his ship.

Then, through the swirling sand I heard more blaster fire. Slicer had made his way to one of the other dead troopers and taken their sidearm. Using his helmet's thermal imaging, he dropped the other Jedi Hunters one by one as he watched the heat signature of the Jedi Starfighter climb into the sky. I could hear several shots burning past me until one struck the lightsaber in my hand. I dropped it and fell backward to the ground as Slicer came to stand over me.

Suddenly, the sand dropped out of the wind back to the ground. The Jedi was gone. Slicer had his blaster trained on me as he cuffed my hands. He loaded me into our transport and took me back to the dig site. I had spared his life, and beside me, he was the last Commando left on the planet and nervous about what to do with me. When he got me back there, he took me down to the freezing facility and unceremoniously locked me in a small chamber and sealed me in carbonite to buy himself some time to think. He must have left the planet or been killed, and I was left behind, forgotten.

I'm glad someone finally got Obi-Wan Kenobi. I just wish things had been different, and it had been me when I had the chance. Most of my memories are still kind of fuzzy, but that one is indelibly etched in my mind."

Holder looked around the room as he finished his story, "I'm a little tired now. I'm going to try to sleep some."

Everyone moved away from his bunk silently and headed out to the Command Center, closing the door.

Etz was amazed, "That's a hell of a story. Twenty years gone, encased in carbonite by his own

squad-mate.”

Rogue nodded his head in agreement, “It’s some story all right . . . if it’s true. We have no proof that any of that happened. He could just as easily have been the traitor.”

Falker nodded his head agreeing, “We may need to check the dig site for some supporting evidence. He might be the most loyal trooper in the Empire, and a Jedi Hunter. Then again, he might not.”

Rogue responded, “I think a trip to the dig site is definitely in order. Until we have more to corroborate his story, let’s keep an eye on Holder. Deckard, keep working on that ‘droid, it may yield some information on this as well.”

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The late afternoon suns were slowly easing toward the sandy horizon and the barracks were buzzing with activity in preparation for the mission to the Dig Site. Ddraig, Etz and 4120 had gone ahead with their gear to bay 98 to prep the shuttle for the flight. It was decided that Felth and I would stay behind with Holder to maintain a presence. Felth was being left to take over the night’s patrol and I was to focus on the ‘droid, whose repair had just jumped in importance. Everything we had been told indicated that the dig site was on the far side of the planet, but no one knew exactly where. I looked up from the motor controller I was wiring, “We can ask Nadon, he mentioned the site to me.”

Rogue shook his head as he hurried past with an armful of rifles, “He said he’d heard of it, not that he’d been there. We need someone with firsthand knowledge.” Topolev sidestepped Rogue and then walked past me, as he slung his gearbag over his shoulder, “BoShek knows where it is. He’s been salvaging mining machinery from the site and selling it.”

Falker looked up as he continued packing his own gearbag, “True, but BoShek is still delivering the latest shipment of those parts to Bespin, I just checked the signal on his locator this morning.” Rogue reappeared, “We can just slip into orbit and look for the site if necessary. If it’s as big as everyone keeps saying it is, we’ll be able to see it from there, but I would rather have someone with us who has been there before.”

Felth yelled in from the Command Center, his face remaining glued to the holo-data port, “Correction. BoShek is currently on his approach glide path, inbound from Bespin, and was just cleared to set down in bay 67. He must have jumped just after you checked him last, Falker.”

Rogue nodded, “Great work, Felth. Blade, Danz, go give him a nice welcome home and impress upon him our need for a guide on this mission. The Empire will compensate him if he needs an incentive. We’ll bring your gear.” They nodded, pulled on their buckets and hurried off toward the spaceport. He watched them go, talking to himself, “Yeah. He’s been there. That’ll help a lot.”

He glanced once more around the room, bucket in hand, making sure he had everything he needed. "It's time to go. Topolev, grab a case of rations and we'll eat on the way." Topolev disappeared into the rear storage room, grabbed a casepack of rations and dropped it into his bag as he muttered under his breath, "I hate these dried up things."

Rogue had moved into the Command Center and opened the main door to the street. The sunlight was now a fluid orange, washing over the rounded domes and streets of Mos Eisley. He stepped out, and the others followed behind. I stepped out and watched them walk off down the street as I fought once more to remember where I had heard Rogue's accent before, but it wasn't coming to mind. The black trooper outlines, silhouetted against the intense amber sunset, cast long shadows in the sandy roadway as they headed for bay 98.

I stepped back inside. It would soon be time to meet Nadon.

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The *Infinity's* engines were winding down as Blade and Danz stepped off the stairs onto the sandy floor of bay 67. The outer hatch released and opened slowly as the boarding ramp lowered. Slight creaks and groans echoed off the bare walls of the stark bay as the ship's weight settled on its' landing pads. Moments later, BoShek ambled down the boarding ramp in his black pressure suit and helmet, pulling off his gloves. He reached up, releasing a small handle under the front of the head dome. The locking ring slipped sideways with a slight release of pressure as he lifted the helmet off. He caught sight of the waiting troopers and breathed in the fresh air as he motioned with an extended thumb over his shoulder, "Gotta get that atmospheric generator fixed one of these days. I hate the stale smell in this thing", and he lowered the helmet to his left side. "What can I do for you this time?"

Danz stepped forward, "We have a need to visit the Dig Site, and a need for you to lead us there and through it. We can make it worth your while, maybe enough for your atmospheric generator." The spacer rolled his eyes skyward thinking of the stale smell of his helmet, and that he could either help willingly and get paid, or pass and end up dead. Blade moved a bit closer, rifle held ready. He closed his eyes and ran a hand over his tired face as he exhaled, "Yeah, I can do that. I did just get in from a long trip, though. Do I have time to stop in the Cantina for a drink first?"

"Not this time." said Blade, moving closer to BoShek, "We're leaving now. Grab what you need from inside and lets go. The others should be at the shuttle by now and ready to go." The exhausted spacer turned and walked wearily back into the ship, setting his helmet down and checking the erg charge level on his blaster clip.

* * *

I watched as Felth stood up from the holonet port, grabbed his helmet and prepared for his patrol of the spaceport. On his own, it would take him most of the night to make the rounds. As I watched him from my bunk, Holder sat straight up in his and let out a howling scream, "My legs area cramping! Deckard, Help!"

I scrambled for the medi-pak, knowing that hibernation sickness cramps could rip the muscles right off the bone if not treated immediately. The lid on the medi-pak flew open and I grabbed the Injector Gun, shoving a muscle relaxant cartridge in as I ran back to his bunk and pulled away the blankets. He was thrashing around; his eyes squeezed shut as he winced in agony. I saw the muscles in his legs rolling and jumping as they spasmed uncontrollably.

With the muzzle pressed firmly against the contorting thigh muscle, I squeezed the trigger, injecting the medicine into his leg. As I did, Felth stepped through the doorway to watch. I shot him again in the other thigh and waited for him to respond. Slowly the tensed, churning muscles relaxed and the cramps subsided. Felth pulled his bucket on as I slipped a tracking chip from a belt pouch and walked over to him, "Hold on, your pack is loose."

He stood still as I grabbed the pack and pressed the small transmitter into the foam filter of his air intake as I adjusted the pack strap for him. I slapped him on the bucket when I had finished, and he headed out the door. I pulled a small device from my belt and switched it on. A small blip appeared, moving away from the center point I had calibrated as headquarters. As long as Felth wasn't at that center point, I was OK.

I went back in to check on Holder. The cramps had stopped, but his legs were aching from the damage that had been done. I reached into the medi-pak and grabbed a tranquilizer insert pack and pressed it into the gun. "This'll help you rest more comfortably" I said as I injected the medicine into his thigh. I covered him with the blankets and he settled down as the medicine flowed through his bloodstream, calming him. I walked over to put the injector back in the medi-pak, whispering to myself, "And it will buy me some uninterrupted time to do some searching."

As I walked through the command center toward the front door, I happened to see the tail end of a holonet message being sent from Felth's account. It was coded to "Base One" and "Skywalker". Why would Felth be sending anything to someone named Skywalker? That was the farmboy, Luke's name. I looked back to the monitor, but the message was gone. Maybe it had been *about* Skywalker and not *to* Skywalker. I wasn't entirely convinced, and I had a very bad feeling about it as I pulled on my bucket and headed out to the street. I turned down the alley and headed toward the rear courtyard to meet Nadon.

As I approached the end of the narrow passage, I saw our shuttle lifting away from the spaceport. Now to test my theory.

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