

## Chapter 33 – Enter The Sandman

Blade looked quickly to the left, then the right and exited the small room into the hall of the Dowager Queen. Two Jawas leaning against the dusty wall several doors down stopped their jabbering and turned to watch him go, amber eyes piercing the blackness of their cloaked faces. Their gaze then moved slowly to the still-open door he had come from.

His auburn-haired shadow, 'Sabela Arlen, slid into the narrow gap between the door and frame he had vacated, watching him go.

As the doors of the turbolift closed with him inside, she silently disappeared behind the closing door of her room; echoes of their brief conversation playing over in her head as she leaned back against the inside of the door. It clicked shut and she locked the heavy bolt. She needed to know more about Kaird and Guri before heading to the spaceport to meet 1265. If they were tailing Blade's group, she needed more information.

She thought about him again; Ardan Drone, aka Blade. He didn't want her to follow; he wanted her to be safe. The more she thought about it, the less she could fight the smile creeping across her face. He was worried about her.

She went to watch, leaning toward the window pane, her face pushed into the musty, diaphanous curtains that hung to the floor. As he walked away into the masses on the sandy street below, a bent, hooded figure bumped into him in the street. Reflexively she jumped, but the stranger retreated immediately, bowing and apologizing. Flipping the safety back on, her hand moved slowly off the grip of her blaster and she relaxed as Blade disappeared into the crowd.

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The door to our building slid open, and Garindan entered, trailed by a crusty, weathered old man in a hooded cloak with desert wraps covering his body and face, and dark goggles shielding his eyes. Rogue and Felth looked up from their seats at the holonet console, as the door slid shut behind their snitch.

Garindan began speaking in squeaks and squawks as Rogue motioned for him to wait. "Hold on." He reached inside his helmet, turning on the translator and switching to broadcast speaker mode. He looked back at his Kubaz spy nodding for him to continue.

The translated voice came from the helmet speakers. "I have found your guide, sir. For years he has claimed to have knowledge about the location you seek." Garindan stepped aside, bringing the man forward.

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Rogue looked him over. "Who are you?"

The old man lifted and pushed back his hood, then pulled down the wraps from his face, revealing a leathery, crease and wrinkle-ridden face, and a thick head of stark white hair. He grabbed his goggles, pushing them up into the snowy tangle, revealing two ice-blue eyes that stood out against his dark, tanned skin.

"Most folks around here call me 'The Sandman' 'cause I generally live outside the towns, out in the sand. Why don't you call me Sandie? It'll make things easier."

Rogue stood up. "OK Sandie . . . I'm Rogue. Why don't you tell me what you know about the place we're looking for."

The old man got a twinkle in his eye, and a slight smile crept onto his face; only the very corners of his mouth turning up slightly. "The place you seek hides from everyone."

He looked off vacantly into a scene from his mind's eye, a sandscape from somewhere in his past travels.

"It sends instruments reeling, readings spike and fall off, and false headings breed confusion. The first time I found it completely by accident; after a sandstorm. An entrance was revealed to me when the 'Sea shifted. I quickly noted the rock landmarks, and it's a good thing, because another storm blew through soon after, covering the entrance I had found while simultaneously revealing another."

He looked back to Rogue, "The sands both conceal and disclose in their own time, like the swelling waves of a vast liquid ocean rising and falling; those things caught beneath lie patiently; waiting to be discovered."

Rogue interjected "It has many entrances?"

Sandie nodded. "I told you, it hides. It doesn't want to be found." He pulled a small collapsible bladder from his belt and took a drink. "Do you have water for a refill?"

"I've got this" said Felth, taking it from the man, and disappearing into the back.

Garindan spoke up, looking toward Sandie. "He's a little rough, but if anyone knows where this place is, my money is on him."

Rogue leaned to his right, unlocking a small box on the console. He reached in and pulled out a small wrapped parcel which he then placed in Garindan's hand. "I think this should catch us up on what we owe you." The Kubaz eyed the unmistakable package of wrapped spice sticks in his palm.

Felth reappeared, handing the container back to Sandie and taking a seat behind the holonet console.

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“Thank you. Oh! It’s cold too!” Sandie looked gratefully over to Felth, then back to Rogue. “I am at your disposal. When do we leave?”

Rogue nodded. “At first light. We were planning on leaving tonight, and get some traveling done when it’s cooler, but we’ve had reports of increased Tusken activity once the suns go down, at least around here. Felth will be air-lifting us to a point out of the city, at the edge of the Dune Sea. We’ll leave from there. Maybe when we get out a bit we can switch to nights.”

Garindan jumped in as he turned to the front door. “I must leave now to bring your pack animals around back and ready them.”

Rogue nodded as the snitch stepped through the front door. As he exited, Holder stepped in, pulling back his hood. Ddraig, Etz and I entered from the back with a crate. Etz released the crate, turning to face the commando. “Hey Holder, you feeling any better?”

He nodded once. “Yeah, much better.”

Rogue flicked his eyes to Holder. “Is Doc here already? I was expecting him shortly, but not this soon.”

Sandie watched with squinting eyes as Holder responded.

“No, I left last night; wanted some time alone before we left. Doc should be here soon though. You said sundown, right?”

Rogue nodded. “Right. This is Sandie. He’ll be our guide for the search.”

Holder looked at the old man, reaching out a hand. Sandie took it, giving a firm shake; his ancient eyelids trembling a bit.

“Is it OK if I get him his gear?” asked Holder.

Rogue nodded. “Sure.”

Holder led Sandie into the back as Ddraig, Etz and I continued loading charged blaster clips into a crate with Topolev keeping count. When we were done, and had sealed the container, Topolev turned and handed the page to Rogue for his inventory.

He was heading toward the bunk room when Rogue stopped him. “Tops, have you seen 4120 or Blade? We’re almost ready and they’re not here.” He handed the count to Felth.

Topolev stopped, turning back to reply. “No, I haven’t seen them.”

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Ddraig jumped in, “4120’s with Garindan out back in the courtyard harnessing up the Eopies. Blade said he’d be back soon. One last sweep I guess.”

Rogue nodded, thinking it over for a moment. “OK” remembering that Blade was going to speak to his “shadow”.

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Tiny blue sparks popped and fizzled inside 4120’s mouth as he quickly re-wrapped the last remaining spice stick in his hand. Several of the Eopie’s grunted. One spit into the sand as it shifted its weight on long legs anxiously. Garindan’s eyes, hidden beneath his black goggles, darted from one side of the courtyard to the other as he secured a buckle on the last animal.

4120’s eyes rolled back in his head a bit, and he leaned back against the half wall of the loading dock, savoring the strong flavor on his tongue and the rush as a wave of chills swept over him. His heart began beating a bit faster and the intolerable itching at his wrist began to slowly subside.

The cloaked snitch took a handful of credits and passed him two more darkly –wrapped packages before disappearing into the shadows. 4120 pulled himself together as he stood up straight, stuffing the spice into an empty belt container. As he did, Falker came out of the narrow, side alley into the courtyard. “Hey, c’mon and grab your gear. Rogue just said Doc and his crew are almost here. We’ve got to figure out a place for them to bed down for the night since our evening departure has been canceled. How many of them are there? I thought maybe we could put them in . . .”

Falker and 4120 headed out through the narrow alley toward the front door leaving Garindan behind with the animals. Blade watched silently from the shadows across the courtyard. Even the Kubaz spy didn’t notice him.

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The Emperor sat alone; motionless with eyes closed. He was as still and rigid as the carbonite-entombed captives that populated the macabre garden surrounding him. Behind his closed eyes, a vision began to emerge from the ever-changing clouds that were the future. He saw himself, overseeing a confrontation between Vader and the missing son the Sith Lord sought.

The boy in question, Luke Skywalker, snapped at something his father said, attacking in an anger-fueled rage, driving the Dark Lord back. Lightsabers slashed and sizzled as his

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apprentice stumbled and fell. Luke aggressively took advantage of this, continuing his attack with a flurry of saber hacks, ultimately severing his father's sword hand. He held the tip of his blade to Vader's throat in certain victory as the image began to fade into more clouds.

A smile formed on Palpatine's warped face as he realized the potential in Luke as a new apprentice; potential he had once seen in Anakin. He cackled in amusement; his evil laughter echoing off the stony walls, glass floor and carbonite slabs. Everything was proceeding as he had foreseen.

Beneath the glass floor of his Carbonite Garden, two Royal Guards in pressurized breathing suits moved carefully over the rocks and around the scattered bodies of dead Jedi until they were directly beneath the Emperor.

One looked up to adjust their position, making sure they could be seen just in front of the throne. When he was sure they were in place, they both knelt with the capsule they carried. On activation, it slid open. The second guard reached in, pulling out an armful of tattered brown cloth. The other guard reached in now, pulling out more brown cloth. Carefully they laid it out on the rocks. Both pieces came together at a clean, burned slice in the center.

Once arranged, it was clear that the cloth was in fact two halves of a heavy, brown hooded cloak. Although a body had not been recovered, Obi-Wan Kenobi's Jedi robes, collected by the recovery team onboard the Death Star were finally a part of the Emperor's grisly display from the Jedi Purge.

It was at that moment that they saw Lord Vader enter the garden above, walk to the spot directly above them, and come to kneel before his master.

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Inside the crumbling ruins of the tiny B'Omar shrine, backed as far into the corner as he could get, the little blue astromech awaited his master's return. The extended lifeform scanner, slowly turning back and forth above his dome revealed his master, beyond the stone wall beside him, and several dozen meters below.

The shimmering blue of the Tatooine sky would soon fall victim to the ambers and reds of another blazing decline into the black of night. Recalled memories of another night on Tatooine coursed through the little droid's processors. Memories of roaming the empty canyons alone in search of a settlement; vivid memories of descending a sloped stone, right up to the instant the hidden Jawas fired the immobilizing ray at him.

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His frame shook a bit, and a very slight electronic whimper escaped from somewhere beneath his dome, which now turned nervously, this way and that. If a 'droid could hope, he was most certainly hoping that Master Luke would return quickly.

Far below, his master carefully followed the stony, descending path in the dim light of Obi Wan Kenobi's youthful image floating above the activated holocron. The young Alliance Commander gripped the luminous cube in his right hand. In his left was a small leather pouch of tools from his mentor's home.

Kenobi's voice echoed off the walls in the still, quiet air, "Continue down this grade and through the opening in the wall ahead."

Luke stepped beneath the dark stone arch and through the twisted breach in the downed B'Omar starship's wrecked hull into the emptiness of the even darker room beyond. The holocron sensed its proximity to a small metallic trigger placed somewhere among the rocks to the left; just where Ben had left it.

The glowing image flickered and fluttered before disappearing, almost immediately replaced with a new and different image of Kenobi. The one that appeared was of a much older Kenobi with white hair and beard, as Luke remembered him.

The image smiled, "Hello Luke. The fact that this recording has been triggered indicates that you have found your way to my training arena."

Luke reached down into a calf pocket on his flight suit and removed a rescue flare. He twisted the metal end cap, activating it, and stood up straight, raising the brilliant white light high above his head to get a good look around as Kenobi continued.

"I converted this wrecked cargo bay into an instructional space many years ago, when you were still a toddler. I did so with the hope that someday your uncle would allow me to train you as a Jedi. With each passing year, that possibility decreased exponentially as his dislike for, and mistrust of me grew. I will also assume that since my marker triggered this particular recording, and that the holocron has led you here and not me personally, I am gone. Consider this place an extension of my home and the cave. All three are yours to do with as you see fit. Take notice of the cables overhead for balance training. The trees positioned around the arena are Bafforr trees."

Luke moved the flare to one side and the other, revealing the trees suspended around the room.

"Within their branches live Ysalimari; small creatures that not only shroud themselves and the trees from the Force, they also create an area surrounding themselves that is a deadened zone, where the Force is not rippled or disturbed; effectively concealing a meditating or practicing Jedi within this ring from unwanted detection by others."

Luke glanced around the room at the trees as the holo continued.

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“On the bench to your left are several lightsabers for training. Any one of these should yield parts useful for repairing a hilt.”

Luke wedged the flare between the planks of a large crate beside him and stepped over to the waist-high bench, setting down the holocron beside a small blast furnace, some dirty rags, and a piece of folded cloth. Carefully, he unclipped the damaged lightsaber from his belt and placed it gently on the cloth.

Silently he unrolled the bag of tools, and reached down to the shelf below for one of the training sabers, carefully laid out on another piece of folded cloth. They were all the same; the simple, tubular hilts nearly smooth except for several small protrusions sticking out as he rolled it over in his hands.

The black grips on the trainer were tightly screwed in place to the metallic tube of the nondescript saber. He nodded approvingly as he glanced over to his own weapon with grips that were quite loose and hopelessly askew.

As he studied the trainer, he noted that it had no glass eye lens and no bubbled activation stud, only two knurled metallic knobs with inset red buttons like the one found on his hilt and a simple circuit board activation sensor strip, but it looked to be part of the clamping collar.

Aside from having a textured band around its center, the clamp was the same as his. There was definitely nothing elegant about it, but he figured it would get the job done if he could simply swap his for this one.

He turned to the patiently waiting holographic image of Kenobi and spoke aloud, “Lightsaber repair.”

Ben’s smiling image retracted into the cube, replaced with detailed schematics as Luke grabbed one of the tools from the bag and set to removing the silver screws from the notched grips.

Hopefully the repairs wouldn’t take very long.

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The spiked cleats strapped to Solo’s boots dug in to the sheer face of the ice wall, and he slammed the pickaxe into the frozen slope, pulling his way up the slick trail toward the mouth of the cave. The rest of the search team was below him, beginning their ascent.

Just outside the rough cut opening ahead he could see several soldiers standing guard with rifles drawn and energized; two facing the room, and two facing in toward him.

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Behind the guards he made out the figures of Leia and Mon Mothma. Both of their faces wore the pallor of extreme concern and worry as they paced; expectantly awaiting his return.

He emerged from the dim passage, breathing heavily from his climb, pulling off his goggles and hood as he stepped into the room. One of the guards shouldered his rifle and offered him a drink of water as he sat down on the idle ice cutter's treads.

Leia caught his eye, looking for a clue, something, anything; and for an instant he returned her worried stare with a solemn one that offered no hope. Mon Mothma also saw his expression as he looked up. She clamped a hand over her mouth and closed her eyes as tears fell, realizing her fears were confirmed; Alia was gone.

Han took a breath and began as delicately as he knew how. "We followed every path, every corridor down there, and they're extensive. We killed several of those things, but there was nothing, no sign of her . . . until we came to the spot where it empties to the outside. There was . . ."

He paused a moment, staring off into space at the image of her mangled remains stained across the ice; staring vacantly at him, and now forever imprinted in his memory.

"There was . . . evidence . . . that she was gone."

He looked down at the goggles in his hand as Leia comforted Mon Mothma, helping her from the room toward her quarters.

Han exhaled hard. That poor kid didn't have a chance against those things.

He watched the women disappear into the hallway. Several moments later, the rest of the search team emerged from the cave opening. They silently made their way past him, carrying a black body bag. Two of the guards followed them out, and two remained behind.

The Corellian smuggler sat in silence atop the cold tread plates of the ice cutter. All he could see was Alia's dead face, her vacant eyes open and staring up at him. He had seen more than his share of death over the years. Hell, he had looked through the smoke curling from the barrel of his blaster into the dead eyes of many he had helped along their journey to death, but it was always the innocent ones that got to him; the ones in the wrong place at the wrong time. The sound of his heart pounded louder and louder against his eardrums.

A group of techs startled him out of his daze as they entered the room followed by several loader 'droids. The mechs that brought up the rear were lumbering creations and carried large crates of equipment; panels and electronics for installing a locking power door over the jagged mouth of the cave to keep those creatures out. He stood up, goggles in hand as they set to work sealing the opening.



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The rear courtyard was now completely submerged in shadow, and Daegan was fuming and muttering under his breath as he stepped from doc's speeder. "I don't get it, what's got us stalled here tonight? Doc was told to be here by sundown, and we all rushed to get here on time." He checked several straps across their loaded down supply sled.

"It was as much a change for us as for you" I said, watching the heat trails rippling off the speeders' side thrusters as they wound down. "Rogue told us we were leaving tonight, and then suddenly changed his mind based on some information about increased Tusken activity in the area; raiding parties coming in closer and closer every night. He felt, since we're traveling with you civilians, it would be safer to set out at first light."

I turned my head back to him, "We're not leaving from here anyway. Our drop ship is going to put us on the ground outside of town, at the edge of the Dune Sea. Our guide, Sandie, says there's a Tusken stronghold not too far out where several Bantha herds are known to gather, and thinks that it should be a good place to begin."

"Fort Tusken" confirmed Daegan. "I know the place. It dates back about 100 years or so. Some of the settlers from Bestine Township built it."

"A new fort in an altogether different sea. So is that one of the places your team is studying?" I asked.

"Yeah" he nodded "but from the surrounding hills with macros. The Sandpeople guard the place pretty fiercely. It's rumored that in the lower levels it houses a spring-fed pool of water. Whether that's true or not has yet to be proven. You think this place is desolate now? Back when the settlers were still in control of the fort, they were all alone out here. The Sandpeople attacked and raided it relentlessly, eventually earning them the 'Tusken Raider' nickname. 'Lina knows more about them than I do, though. She was here studying them on her own once before. I'll let her fill you in on the details. I'd probably get them wrong."

I stretched my neck to one side and then the other, cracking the stiff vertebrae. "She may be interested in a series of caves we accidentally found out in one of the nearby canyons. They've got burial chambers and cave art from some of the earliest Sandpeople, and structures that pre-date even them, going back to the Ghorfa and Kumumgah. At least that's what we were told by some of the local moisture farmers. I'll have to show her and the rest of you sometime, maybe when we get back from our little expedition."

Daegan grinned, almost laughing. "Sandie? Are you kidding me? Sandie? Is that really the guide's name?"

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I concealed any amusement as I responded, nodding my head. “Our snitch, the one who found him for us, says he’s known around here as ‘The Sandman of Tatooine’. The old guy suggested we call him Sandie for short to make things easier. He never did give us a real name. I guess it’s not really important though, as long as he knows where he’s going and how to find what we’re looking for.”

“So, what are you looking for? ‘Lina knows, but she’s not talking.”

Now it was my turn to grin as I dodged his question, “That’s a bigger question than I’m cleared to share right now. C’mon, let’s head inside, the morning’s going to come early. If Rogue gives the OK, I’ll let your whole team know.”

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Felth nodded, agreeing, “I’ll have the ship ready for the morning, but there’s something wrong with the thrust sequencer on the starboard engine.”

Rogue shook his head as Felth read his silent concern.

“It’ll be ready, but I need to get over to the docking bay to make a few repairs and adjustments and give it a test flight.”

A moment of silence passed, then Rogue gave a nod. “Go ahead. I’ll have 4120 finish the packing out back.”

He paused and Felth turned to go, then he continued. “Just make sure it’s ready to be loaded by dawn. We’ll leave as soon as everything is aboard.”

Felth gave a half-hearted wave of his hand and nodded without turning back as he opened the door, pushing past me and Daegan. Rogue exited the front office, disappearing into the bunk room to find 4120 as I closed the front door. Daegan followed after him and I brought up the rear a few moments later.

Every spare bunk we had in the next room was now occupied, and several bed rolls lay on the floor. ‘Lina and Miren sat on Ddraig’s bunk, fascinated as he worked on the astromech, explaining to them what he was doing and why. ‘Lina was young, probably mid twenties and quite flirty. Miren was in her early thirties and quite attractive, but was clearly an archaeologist and scientist first.

Blade entered the room from the front, moving past me as Daegan sat down and joined Bem, Ereka, Doc and Ash in their game of Sabacc. Danz and 1265 stood watching the card game while Zu sat adjacent to them on her bunk, cleaning her field stripped blaster and occasional eyeing the cards in play herself. Blade moved through the crowd, pulling 1265 aside for a brief, private conversation.

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Etz, Topolev and Holder were busy packing their gear bags, while Falker and 0600 stretched out on their bunks, relaxing and watching everyone else. Sandie lay on one of the bed rolls in the corner, trying hard to watch the group, but fighting a losing battle with heavy eyelids and sleep. 1265 nodded twice to Blade, then returned to his bunk to grab his helmet and head out through the front.

At about the same moment, 4120, wearing only his black flight suit and boots, entered from the rear store room, heading past me toward the front.

“Hey, is Rogue still back there?” I asked as he passed me.

He looked back quickly, but kept moving, “Yeah but he’s headed down to the cache.”

I watched him disappear through the front door and then noticed Falker also watching him.

“Deck, does he look OK to you?”

“I guess so. Why?”

He shook his head slowly as 0600 cut his eyes over, listening. “I don’t know exactly, can’t quite put my finger on it. I mean he’s usually pretty laid back, but lately he’s looking a little rough around the edges; seems preoccupied and jittery; kinda on edge.”

I looked back toward the front door. “Huh, I hadn’t noticed.”

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Keeping his distance, so as not to be discovered, 4120 followed Felth through the twisting streets and hallways to the spaceport, watching as he descended the steps to the docking bay below. Something just wasn’t right. There had been nothing wrong with the starboard engine thrust sequencer the last time HE had flown the ship.

Each step he took following Felth down to the bay was taken slowly and deliberately to avoid detection until he could safely watch from behind several cargo containers in the safety of the shadows. Crouched down behind them afforded him a clear view.

Felth glanced up and around the walls of the pit as he opened the maintenance hatch on the side of the engine in question for a quick look. Almost immediately, he pulled his head back out and stepped over to the toolbox, grabbing a small device with coiled cords leading to a probe.

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4120 immediately identified it as a sequence analyzer and calibrator, but a puzzled look took over his sweaty face, and he pushed trembling fingers through his disheveled hair as Felth reached back inside the hatch to use the tool.

He appeared to be taking a reading, and making adjustments, then replaced the tool with the others in the box and cut only his eyes up to hovering security 'droids near the rim of the pit. He closed the access panel and wiping his hands together, disappeared up the boarding ramp into the ship.

4120 heard the power plant come on-line from somewhere within the ship, followed by the engines. They steadily rose in pitch as he rolled the whole situation over in his head. What was Felth up to? He held the swollen, red stump above his cybernetic hand, wincing as a sharp pain shot up his arm. The ship lifted from its landing gear, slowly at first, simply hovering, and then rose with certainty above the rim of the open pit, disappearing into the darkening sky as the main engines engaged.

As Felth slipped away, a perplexed 4120 walked over to the tool box, looking at the tool that had been used. It was clearly marked SEQUENCE ANALYZER/CALIBRATOR, but something was very wrong and 4120 knew it. With shaking hands, he quickly unwrapped a small stick of spice, pushed it in his mouth and bit down hard, crushing it in a shower of blue sparks that spilled out over his lips as he scratched at his infected wrist. The rush was immediate, and the pain in his arm quickly faded away.

He had used that same tool before, many times at his post on Ralltiir, but it was for analyzing and calibrating the firing sequence of onboard mounted guns and cannons; it had absolutely nothing to do with engine thrust sequencer calibration on this, or any other ship.

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'Sabela Arlen, in a black hooded robe, sat motionless in the shadows of the spaceport watching Guri's ship. The small communicator in her palm began to vibrate. She held it close to her mouth, barely daring to whisper, "Are you in place?"

1265's voice whispered in response, "I'm in place. Kaird's ship is looking pretty quiet. You OK?"

Without taking her eyes off the ship, she replied as there was a small movement in the cockpit, "I'm good. Let me know if anything changes, otherwise silence."

Inside the vessel under surveillance, Guri sat forward in the cockpit to the edge of her seat, positioning her face into the range of the holo-receptor's scanning beams. She appeared human, and was athletic with strong features. The hologram of a restless figure

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paced on the console before her. He was a tall, green-skinned Falleen; humanoid in appearance with the subtle, residual features of his ancient reptilian ancestry. A thick topknot of black hair erupted from his otherwise bald head. He turned, looking to one side as Guri began, in a warm, throaty voice.

“Kaird is here, sir. The Port Authority confirmed that his ship is here now.”

He thought carefully, replying slowly at first; surgically selecting his words.

“The conversation”, he paused. “That brief conversation with the Hutt, and the events that followed on that recording must never again see the light of day. Matalla tried to tell me about the Jedi, but I silenced him. He tried to warn me that the Jedi he had seen carried with him an infant, and how uncharacteristic that was for a Jedi. I couldn't be bothered with his observations of some warrior refugee; that was the obsession of the Emperor's new Dark Lord.”

He took a few steps, lowering his gaze, but still staring off into nothing, as if once again visiting that dark hallway in his mind.

“I had no way of knowing then, but I now believe that the Jedi he saw was Kenobi, and the child mentioned grew to be mentored in the Jedi way, and went on to obliterate Tarkin and his Death Star.”

His eyes darted from side to side. “If that were to be revealed to Vader; if Kaird were to recover that recording and present it to the Dark Lord, all of Black Sun's contracts that I worked so hard to negotiate would be finished, and the Emperor's servant would hunt me relentlessly.”

He turned to look squarely at her now, his perfect white teeth gleaming as he spoke.

“If Kaird locates that recording first, he'll destroy me with it. He'll be searching alone, though; he won't involve the Hutts. He can't afford to bring them into it. I thought I was rid of this concern long ago, but now he's determined to dig up the past for his own gain. You know what must be done where Kaird is concerned.”

She nodded, “And what of the Imperial troops also searching for it? How should they be dealt with?”

He looked off again, “Even if they make the find, they may not know the full extent of what they have beyond the evidence of murder, but that's a chance I am not willing to take.”

He turned back to her again. “That recording can never leave Tatooine, Guri, are we clear?”

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The blonde-haired human replica 'droid stared back with pale and clear blue eyes. "Clear as Adegan crystals, Prince Xizor."

His holographic image dissolved, and she took a deep breath, mimicking human behavior beautifully.

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"Yes R2, I was able to fix it this time, but you need to be more careful."

The little 'droid gave a sheepish groan of apology as they made their way down to the X-wing fighter below. It sat waiting, atop a flat stone clearing at the base of the canyon.

"C'mon around here, and I'll quick-charge the repulsor packs so we can get you loaded in and . . ."

His sentence broke mid-stream as he noticed a figure dressed in black leaning against his boarding ladder. He reflexively unclipped his newly restored lightsaber, igniting it. The milky blue blade flashed out from the hilt, illuminating his face and arm in the dim twilight of the canyon; the low rumbling snarl of the energy beam cutting through the silence between them.

The dark figure stood up straight, but drew no weapon. Luke listened as he strained in the dim light to see; there was no cold, mechanical breathing; it was not Vader.

Suddenly it spoke, "I'm not armed. I was hoping to meet you. You are Skywalker, right?"

The voice was not menacing or threatening. Luke stood in silence, wondering who could have known he was here, let alone his name. He did not reply, allowing the silence to stand as he waited for more information. R2 whimpered slightly.

"I received a holonet message from 'BASE ONE' advising that you were on-planet. They gave me the coordinates to locate your ship. I'm the one that's been funneling information to you and the rebellion."

He paused for just a second and stepped forward into the saber's glow as he continued. Luke lowered his blade slightly, looking the other man in the eyes.

The figure took another step closer, staring back at him.

"My name is Davin Felth."

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