

**Chapter 34 – Into The ‘Sea**

It was from the deep murk of a dense mental haze that 4120, quite certain he was falling to his death, suddenly jolted awake. His arms reflexively splayed out wide, back to the stone wall he sat propped against; his wild eyes and rapid breathing conveyed the terror of the very real sensation.

Disjointed thoughts raced through his mind as he tried to make sense of the mental clutter in his head, trying to determine just how much time had elapsed since he had ingested the Spice stick. Like some synchronized, mechanical stamping tool, the blood pounding rhythmically through his brain created small flashes of light, strobing in the darkness behind his closed eyelids.

From the darkness of the courtyard, the wide, rough tongue of one of the Eopies licked the side of his face from jaw to hairline. It lowered its head to inspect, sniffing him. 4120 leaned forward suddenly, reaching for his mouth as his stomach spasmed involuntarily and he vomited into the sand. The animal jerked its head away suddenly, disturbed by the abrupt sound, and the foul smell that followed. It watched as the trooper wiped his mouth and stood up, staggering; moving slowly closer to the supply sleds.

He looked around. Somehow before blacking out from the Spice rush, he must have made his way back to base and finished packing the supplies. He glanced skyward noting the blackness and stars. It's still night, he thought to himself.

Mustering all the strength and balance possible, he took the stairs up to the loading dock and opened the back door to the barracks. Quietly he navigated his way through the tangle of sleeping bodies to his bunk and rolled in. As his eyes fell closed again, he noticed Felth lying in his bunk asleep; it registered on some level in his spinning brain, and he quickly descended into a deep sleep.

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Deep in the bowels of the Star Destroyer, *Seether*, a unit of Stormtroopers files into the cramped ships' armory to replace damaged gear and replenish supplies.

As they enter the small room, several remove their O2 tanks and wait in a line to refill them.

One trooper, helmet in hand, moves past this group directly to the repair counter and strikes up a conversation with the technician, pointing to damaged thermal imaging sensors inside his helmet.

Another sizes himself for a new pair of boots.

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One sits on a bench, emptying his damaged utility belt and transferring its contents to a new belt. As he pulls out his med kit, a small datacard drops to the deck plate. He bends over to pick it up, and holds it to the light. It is cracked, in a spiderwebbed pattern with the smeared words "Base one" on it. His mind flashes back to the jungles of Yavin IV.

*He remembered bending down during the assault on the rebel base to pick up a dropped clip from the ground. It was then that he noticed the datacard, stuck in the crack between two of the metal floor grates. He remembered the smell of the explosions, the smoke, the screams and the smeared label which read "Base One". It had been stepped on and crushed; fractured in a splintered, spiderwebbed pattern. He remembered tucking it into his utility belt.*

Turning the card over in his hand, he looked up, thinking a moment. Then, he gathered up his new belt and supplies, hastily leaving the room. As he rushed along a busy hallway, he passed a group of officers, then turned back, holding up the card and addressing the group.

"Sir, I found this when we infiltrated the rebel's base on Yavin. I forgot to turn it in when I got back, but it could be helpful. Can you pass it along?"

One of them turned back, looking his way as the other officers in his group went on without him.

Annoyed at both the interruption and being left behind by his peers, he took the datacard, his eyes never leaving the trooper. "I'll see it's looked into."

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In a relatively quiet portion of the Expansion Region, following a course composed of short, zigzagging hyperspace jumps, the rebellion's 'Renegade group' pushes on toward Hoth. Their mission is simple: escort the transport of two Ion Cannons and the Praetor-class ship reactors to power them safely to Hoth.

From somewhere further back in the convoy, a voice crackles in Commander Narra's headset.

"Renegade Leader, this is Renegade Two."

"I copy Renegade Two, go ahead."

"Sir, one of the two transport ships is reporting a critical energy bleed from her port engine. The crew leader of the *Allantrid* says the containment shielding has failed completely. They've had to evacuate the area and are being forced to shut down the

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reactor and engine. Unless they can stop long enough to make repairs, they won't be able to limp along fast enough to keep up with us."

"We're already out beyond the fringe of this system's inhabited regions" replied Narra. "Ask them if they think they can make it to Derra IV. We've got an outpost there. It's not much more than a storage dump, but the techs on the orbital platform should be able to fix the shielding problem."

The comm went silent.

The Commander broke from his lead position in the formation, rolling his X-wing to the right. He came around, peering through the transparisteel of his canopy, across the empty gulf of space to face the damaged transport.

A crackle came through his headset as Renegade Two patched him through directly to the crew. He heard a somewhat garbled message, filled with electronic distortion and transmission static.

"Affirmative, Renegade Leader, *Allantrid* should be able to make Derra IV."

"Copy that, *Allantrid*. Renegade Two let's get them an escort detail. The rest of us will move on ahead and alert the station."

"Yes, sir."

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The blinding brightness of the day flooded into the rear of the open drop ship. Even though still quite hot by human standards, the temperatures of the Tatooine days and nights had begun their annual decline, signaling the beginning of the harvest and the advent of winter on this Outer Rim planet. To see the rippling waves of heat rising from the brilliant, lifeless sand at the bottom of the loading ramp, one might find that hard to believe. The planet that had already proven to each of us that its heat was harsh and unforgiving, and it was gearing up to reveal a second, ugly face that was just as brutal.

Most everyone else had unloaded, but Doc was still strapped into his harness, sitting in one of the folding, metal jump seats along the side bulkhead of the drop ship. He pulled a heavily worn pair of desert goggles from his pack and was busily wiping the dirty crimson lenses. Zu noticed what he was doing and walked over to sit beside him.

She grabbed her newer-looking goggles with the blue lenses, and pulled them off her eyes, dragging them up to rest on her forehead as she eyed the old ones in doc's hands.

"How long have you had those antiques?" she asked.

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He gave her a silent glance as he adjusted the straps, pulling them a bit tighter across the back of his silvery hair. Fuzzy eyebrows spilled this way and that over the red lenses as he slid them into place, working them down on his eyes to a comfortable spot, adjusting the side blinders.

He glanced around and then leaned in close to her. "I didn't have any, so . . ." He paused a moment, looking around again and finally back into her eyes. "I kinda borrowed them from Watcher's personal effects."

A mischievous smile formed on her face as she stood up, staring back down at him.

"Well . . ." she began, patting him gently on the shoulder. "He won't be needing them, I don't think."

Doc smiled back at her as he cinched the top of his pack closed and stood up. Falker and Danz pushed past them, maneuvering one of the overloaded supply sleds down the ramp to the sand, followed closely by Topolev and Ddraig pushing another.

Doc and Zu followed them out of the relative comfort afforded by the shady interior of the ship and stepped out into the sand, walking over to the others in the archaeological team. Falker, Topolev and O600 had hitched the Eopies to the repulsor sleds and lined them up, readied to move out.

Felth and Rogue walked down from the cockpit and out from within the ship, down to the edge of the ramp. "I'll be on call if you need an emergency pick-up, supplies, and when you find the recording."

Rogue nodded, looking out into the bleaching sunlight through squinted eyes as Felth returned to the cockpit. The first trickle of perspiration ran down the side of his face. He stepped off into the sand, as he adjusted the settings on his pack. Moments later, as he walked toward the others, a cooling wave coursed through his black body glove.

The wide ramp lurched and slowly closed behind him as the engines came online. The drop ship lifted silently away from the blistering sand on repulsor power, then pulled away as Felth engaged the main drive.

Rogue turned to watch until the accelerating ship was gone from sight, heading back to base. He unclipped the personal memo recorder from his belt and held it to his mouth, pressed the record switch and hesitated momentarily. Clicking off the recorder, his eyes moved over the baked sands stretching out in all directions as far as he could see. Finally, they came to rest on the archaeologists and his guide, none of whom he knew or trusted fully.

He pressed the recorder's activation button again as he looked over to the rest of us.

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“What the hell have I gotten us into?”

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Our crusty guide chewed the last bit of his lunch and swallowed. From the shade beneath the makeshift canopy of fabric of his outer wrap, his ice-blue eyes moved slowly over both teams. The troops were gathered in a small circle, as were the archaeologists.

His tongue moved over his teeth, working loose the small pieces of food stubbornly caught in them. Neither the troops, nor the diggers was intentionally excluding the other; they simply seemed to naturally gravitate toward those of their own.

Miren and “Lina sat with their backs to a supply sled and had followed his lead, constructing small shade canopies above their heads. He nodded approvingly.

Temperatures out here on the ‘Sea varied by 10 – 15 degrees between direct sunlight and shade. By removing the overhead sunlight, they had removed one of the four ways they were being bombarded by heat: overhead direct sunlight, heated winds, heat reflected from the sand, and the heat of contact with the sand itself. Reducing even one of these would reduce their need for water, and on an open-ended search like this, that could prove helpful.

The traveling so far had been both difficult and demanding, tapping the strength of each in the group, likely leaving them more exhausted than they might have imagined possible even a day ago. The ‘Sea was blistering and merciless, with no natural shade to be found anywhere.

I glanced around the resting caravan and off to a small stony outcropping to our right. Contrary to what I had previously believed to be true about this barren wasteland, every now and then we came across sporadic clumps of coarse scrub vegetation.

In a bit of forced conversation earlier in the day, our guide had said the near invisible path we were taking was a Bantha migration trail. The more I thought about it, the more I realized he was probably right. The little bit of brush had most likely sprouted from seeds left behind along the trail in dropped Bantha dung. Unfortunately, the woody scrub grew very low to the ground with few leaves and no shade to speak of.

Sandie took a small sip of water from his belt canister as Rogue walked over to him, asking “Do you have a feel for when we’ll pick up a trail?”

The white-haired old man plugged the water canister, replacing it on his belt. “We’ve been on a trail since we left the drop ship” he said with a grin. “It’s a less traveled path than most, but it’ll lead us to Fort Tusken where we’ll find the major trail we need.

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Topolev and 0600 walked up beside Rogue as Sandie continued, turning to look their way. "I've been to the boneyard before." He tapped his temple. "It's in here. Don't worry, I'll get you there."

Tops rolled his eyes as he turned and walked away from the old man.

As he did, 0600 stepped closer and took a pinch of Mandalorian Sweetgrass from a pouch on his belt, shoving it between his front lower teeth and lip. "How far is it, would you say? How many dead Banthas do you figure we'll find once we get there?" He worked the Sweetgrass into place with his tongue.

He and Rogue listened as Sandie squinted a bit, closing one eye completely against the bright sunlight. "It's nowhere near a complete crossing of the 'Sea, but several days' journey into her heart nevertheless."

The weathered desert dweller motioned an extended finger toward an outcropping of stone thrust up from the sand out near the horizon. Rippling waves of heat rising up from the ground made the distant stone joggle and dance like mountains in a dream.

"We'll make it to Fort Tusken before sundown. It's near the base of those hills" he said. "The boneyard itself is littered with the gleaming white bones and decaying carcasses of several thousand Bantha; fallen beasts in the cavern as far as you can see, from countless generations. Don't worry, I'll know it when I see it; or more precisely, when I feel it." He tapped the center of his chest. "When I feel it."

0600 spit into the sand, looking toward Rogue, "I imagine with that many rotting Banthas around, we'll know it 'when we smell it'."

Rogue grinned, turning to call out to everyone in the group. "Let's move out!"

As the collection of voyagers stood up and readied themselves and the animals to set out again, Falker grabbed the reins of one Eopie, leading it around to one of the sleds for harnessing. As he looked back at the animal, he noticed a bright glint flash out from the sand some distance behind their procession. He pulled off his goggles and looked with his naked eyes.

I stopped and looked back to where his eyes were trained. "What is it?"

He blinked twice, staring hard behind us, trying to see the thing again, then he turned to me. "I could've sworn there was a flash, or something there, but I don't see it now. I guess it was nothing, Deck. This damned heat must have me seeing things."

I looked back in the direction he'd been staring as he walked off with the Eopie and Rogue came over to me.

"What was that about, Deck?"

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I flashed him a brief look and cut my eyes back to the distant sand, pointing with my right hand extended toward the horizon. "Falker said he saw a small flash of light back there, just for a moment."

Rogue looked in the direction I indicated. "I'll get on the comm to 1265 and make sure our Nediji assassin is still on or near his ship."

I nodded as I walked away. "Good idea."

Rogue gave the distant sand another look, then swept his stare slowly across the sands to the right and left.

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It was later that afternoon that Engedi Etz, walking alongside Danz at the rear of our column, stopped walking momentarily. He turned back to look where we had been, only to see our tracks trailing off toward the horizon, disappearing entirely about halfway there; filled in and swept smooth by the abrasive ground spray constantly blowing over the ground.

Turning, he hurried to catch up with Danz. When he did, he found it hard to contain his thoughts. "You know, when you cruise past places like this on a destroyer, you really can't appreciate the size or scope of what's below you. It's so silent and still from out there; serene even."

"I know what you mean" said Danz. "When I left Bestine IV I was amazed at how calm it all looked from above, so beautiful like a gleaming, blue jewel. You'd never guess the violent oceans on the surface were constantly pitching and rolling, with waves crashing into what little solid ground there was; you'd never even begin to think about all the life and danger in the waters of that blue planet."

He stopped walking and stooped down, grabbing a handful of sand. "You know what I've noticed?" He spread his gloved fingers apart, allowing the sand to drain between them, pouring to the ground in three smooth streams.

Etz shook his head as Danz looked back from the horizon to the spilling sand. "There are no animal shells in this sand."

Etz looked at the sand around them as Danz continued.

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“Either this planet never had any water and aquatic life on it, or anything that was once here has been completely broken down and pulverized by the sheer power of the moving sand.” He stood up.

Etz looked back out over the dunes. “You know, our run in with that Sandperson, and all the bones we saw in that cave got me thinking. After we got back from rescuing those kids from the Beggar’s Canyon crash, I read up on Tatooine’s history a little. It said long ago there were vast oceans and a jungle over most of the surface.”

Danz looked around at the barren dunes in every direction.

Etz continued, “Hard to believe, I know, but the jungle was inhabited by the native and technologically advanced Kumungah. At some point, the Rakatan Infinite Empire invaded the planet, conquering and enslaving the Kumungah. Eventually, they rebelled and managed to drive the Rakata off planet. Unfortunately, their victory was short-lived.

In retaliation, the orbiting Rakata ships subjected the planet to a bombardment that boiled away the oceans, and "glassed" the remaining surface. It basically fused the silica in the soil into glass. Subjected to the high winds, the glass broke up over time into sand. Very little of the original moisture remains. The utter destruction and resulting climate change split the indigenous Kumungah into two races: the Ghorfas, or ancestors to the modern day Sandpeople, and what we know today as Jawas.”

“Huh.” said Danz throwing the last of the sand down. Without another word, he and Etz hurried to catch up with the group.

Rogue walked just ahead of them with 4120, trying to reach 1265 on a commlink but having no luck.

“Still no answer?”

Frustrated, Rogue turned to his XO as he clicked off the comm. “No, and now this thing needs charging.” He replaced it on his belt.

4120 thought a moment as they walked. “Well, 1265 is watching Kaird. Maybe he can’t respond without compromising his location. When we stop for the night, I’ll set up the fusion generator so you can get a charge, then you can call Felth and have him go check 1265 at the spaceport in person and report back.”

Rogue nodded. “Good plan.” He looked behind, noting the same disappearing footprints Etz had just seen. “Something’s just not right. I have a bad feeling about it.”

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The mountains that marked Fort Tusken's location had grown steadily larger as our day wore on. We were drawing close when 'Lina called for help from the end of the procession. "Doc! Doc, we need your med kit and some water. Erek just collapsed."

The old man gripped the bag's straps stretched across his chest as he turned back and ran toward them. 'Lina moved aside as he reached them. With one foot, Doc dug a rut in the sand and knelt in it beside Erek. He pressed his hand on the boy's forehead and felt at his neck for a pulse. "Clear a space here to lay him down. Dig it down about as deep as the rut where I'm kneeling, the sand is cooler there."

'Lina began scooping sand aside and Bem dropped down beside her to help. As they finished, Zu crouched down, grabbing Erek's feet as Daegan helped Doc move his upper body into the cooler spot. I knelt down at the boy's head with a container of cool water. Doc untied the loose wrap around his own neck and head, soaking it with the water. Then he placed it on Erek's face and neck, moving it around slowly to cool and dampen his skin. The others sat Erek up slightly as I poured a small sup of water. Doc took it from me, trickling a small bit into the boy's mouth. His moistened tongue moved a bit, and he began speaking deliriously in unrecognizable words and phrases.

Doc stripped off his own outer robe as he addressed the group that had gathered. "Give him some shade. Take this and block the suns."

We all stood up, grabbing a place on the garment, stretching it out taut to create a shadow that fell across them both. Doc gave Erek another small sip of water, immediately noting the cooling effect of the shade.

As we continued taking care of Erek, Sandie pushed ahead to the top of the next dune. He caught sight of something ahead and ducked down suddenly, falling flat to the sand; careful to remain hidden behind the ridge line. He slowly raised his head up to peer over the dune's crest.

In the valley beyond lay the exposed base of the jagged, towering hills. Between us and them sat Fort Tusken.

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A small group of freighters, loosely assembled in an unmoving cluster, lay adrift far above a massive green and blue planet smeared with dense white and grey clouds. A squadron of snubship fighters drifted between them with engines off. A short distance from them, a lone freighter, the *ALLANTRID*, sat at a full stop after having limped a fair distance to reach the orbital platform she was now moored alongside.

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From the far side of the platform, a lone X-wing fighter suddenly appeared from within the black as it reverted from hyperspace. Immediately upon its appearance, the engines of all ships in the fighter squadron roared to life, propelling half of them away from the freighters to intercept the inbound ship, and maneuvering the remaining half into a defensive posture around them.

As they approached it, a voice sounded in their headsets from the newcomer's fighter. "Commander Narra, this is Commander Skywalker. Rieekan informed me of your status and asked that I check on your situation as I passed near the system."

A moment later Narra's voice came over the comm. "Renegade flight, stand down. I repeat, stand down. Nice to hear from you Luke! We've got a freighter undergoing repairs that shouldn't take much longer. We could use another set of eyes and sensors if you've got the time, we're pretty vulnerable sitting out here."

"Roger that, Commander. I'll stay with you until you are clear to continue on." Luke maneuvered his ship toward the other fighters and cut his engines, drifting slowly into their formation. R2 electronically mumbled his disapproval.

Orbiting silently and invisibly, deep in the haze and ionic distortion of Derra IV's upper atmosphere, a small ship took notice of the gathering.

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