

Chapter 35 – Staying The Course

Taking advantage of a brief reprieve from the storms that had raged across the frozen surface of Hoth, Mon Mothma ambled through the defensive trenches roughly cut into the snow and ice outside the base.

The seemingly endless wailing of the winds had finally given way to still, clear blue skies and sunlight. The spiked deck plates beneath her boots had been dropped haphazardly into all of the trenches, creating a more stable path than the bare snow and ice afforded. Rebel troops hurried around her, moving supplies, guns and energy cables to key positions along the trench and to the many turret gun arrays that made up the outer defenses.

Her personal guard detail trailed silently behind, noticing that today she was more disconnected than usual, quieter; more distant. Although fairly young, Alia had been her aid for years and had not only known the duties her position required, but also the proper manner and behavior required among any dignitaries she might encounter. The guards mourned the loss of her as well.

Alia was so young. So much loss and pain had been endured by so many. Darkness had somehow wormed its way in, rotting the core of the Senate; choking out everything the Republic had been. She suddenly realized how quiet it was. All the troops had moved on to forward areas and were gone; she was alone in the trenches, staring out across the ice fields. The Emperor must be stopped, she thought. If he and Vader had built one station capable of destroying planets, they could build more, if they hadn't already.

Tears streamed down her face, burning on her cheek in the frigid air as the faces of her friends Bail and Breha appeared in her mind's eye, both gone in an instant along with the rest of Alderaan, while their daughter watched helplessly.

Mon continued to wander ahead of the guards, openly weeping now.

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Inside the base, Yané walked the frozen corridors in search of the princess. Their meeting had been both abrupt and awkward, and she feared the wrong first impression had been made. She sensed something between Leia and Solo, and did not want to, in any way, be seen as an obstacle.

She made a turn into a dim hall lined with doors on one side. As she moved through the narrow corridor, she heard music flowing from within one of them. It stopped her in her tracks; the sudden recognition. She closed her eyes, listening as she turned back toward the door. It was the unmistakably beautiful strains of the Royal Anthem of Alderaan.

The Sandtrooper's Story

She retraced her steps and knocked softly on the door, waiting for a response. The music played on and she heard no movement from within. She knocked again, harder this time. Almost immediately the music fell silent, after which the door opened slightly.

Torynn Farr's face appeared in the narrow crack of the open door. It was obvious from her puffy face and red eyes that she had been crying. "I'm sorry, did the music disturb you?"

"No, not at all. I didn't mean to intrude." Said Yané, pausing briefly. "Did you have friends there? On Alderaan?"

Fresh tears fell down Torynn's cheeks. "Family" she sobbed. "My entire family was there, my whole world. I was off-planet on my way to Talasea when . . ." she hesitated. "When it happened."

The retired royal handmaiden from Naboo took a shallow breath, giving a moment of silent solemnity to the memory of those lost and then reached out, gently wiping Torynn's tears from her face. "I can still remember hearing that music for the first time, as a child. My father was a diplomat, and had brought my mother and me along on one of his many trips to Alderaan. He said he wanted to expose me to its rich art and culture."

She closed her eyes briefly. "I can still smell the sweetness of the air; hear the anthem as the royal procession made its way through the streets, open for all to see. I could feel the energy that emanated from the people and indeed, the very planet itself. I returned many times over the years both in a business capacity and for pleasure, spending days wandering the capital city, taking in the architecture and art. I mourn it from a different place, but mourn it all the same."

She could see the pain across Torynn's face. "You know dear, I know someone who shares your personal attachment and loss; someone here in this base. The Princess Leia Organa has been a secret leader of the Alliance for some time now. She lost her entire family as well, and is the last member of the royal house of Alderaan. I was actually looking for her when I heard the music. I know she shares your pain, and probably hasn't allowed herself to grieve, or hear that sweet anthem in some time. Why don't you come with me, and we'll find her together?"

Torynn nodded as she wiped away the last of her tears. She disappeared for a moment, quickly returning with her parka. Yané put her arm around the young girl's shoulders and closed the door as they walked away in search of the princess.

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Beneath the endless depths of the black, star-filled Tatooine night, Falker and Topolev lay flat out on the sand, each with a set of macrobinoculars, peering over the crest of the

The Sandtrooper's Story

dune they lay on. The lenses rotated back and forth slightly, moving in and out with the hushed whirring of tiny electric motors, as they worked to focus on the guards stationed just outside Fort Tusken.

Topolev noticed that with this closer look, the outer shell of the Tusken head wraps was pretty grotesque. The bandages that wrapped their heads were dry-rotted, tattered and frayed from years in the harsh Tatooine elements and obscured any direct view of the creatures beneath. He lowered his macros, looking down toward the fort with his own, unaided eyes. "I think Rogue was right, to set camp where we did."

Falker nodded slightly as he replied, still looking at the electronic image in the eyepieces of his macros. "With Erek trying to get his strength back, and us being this close to the Fort, it made sense for Sandie to suggest it to him. Tomorrow morning we'll have to keep a close watch on that herd, though." He pointed to the far right corner of the Fort where they were gathered. Tops looked in that direction, nodding in agreement as Falker switched off his binoculars and slipped them back into their case.

"Now it's up to them" said Topolev. "Somehow I never imagined the course of a mission would be directed by following a herd of Banthas."

Falker grinned a little as he pushed himself up to his knees. "It's time for Ddraig and Blade to take over watch for us. I'll go back and send them up to relieve you."

Topolev nodded as Falker stood up and headed back to the group, leaving him alone on the dune.

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A split second after visually confirming the fugitive across the room against the wanted poster displayed inside his visor, a calm settled over him. His pulse began to slow, and his breathing became rhythmic and measured as he waited.

The man he watched ordered a drink for himself and the woman beside him. The noisy bar was thick with smoke, and patrons busily shouting out their bets on various races and sporting events being broadcast on large screens around the room. There were many people between him and the man across the room, so he waited. He waited for the crowd to thin and finally part, giving him a clean shot.

As it did, he immediately raised the custom EE-3 rifle, snugging the stock up against his shoulder and adjusting a setting before taking aim. Relaxing, he squeezed the trigger slowly between breaths, between heartbeats. The boisterous, raucous crowd was suddenly silenced by the blast discharged from his weapon.

The Sandtrooper's Story

When the barrel of his gun stopped smoking, he laid it gently across the crook of his left elbow and silently made his way across the room. The woman seated at the table stared wide-eyed at the Mandalorian warrior as he approached, tears streamed down her face, and her body shook uncontrollably with shock and fear.

The fugitive and most of the table he stood beside had suffered a direct hit from his broad spectrum, wide-angle disintegration blast. Both the man and the furniture had been instantly incinerated, and yet both retained their shape. The blackened man stood unmoving beside the charred table.

Fett slowly turned his head to the woman, uttering only a single word. "Go."

The terrified woman slipped out of her seat and ran off into the crowd.

The bounty hunter cocked his head to one side and reached out, touching the man on his shoulder. As he did, what had been the man fell forward into the table, both collapsing to the floor in a silent cascade of ashes. Fett took a step closer, wiped away the fine ashes that had settled on his gauntlets and chest armor, and knelt.

He ran his gloved fingers through the ash pile, searching for something he could use to identify his victim. Except for a few bone fragments and the molten remains of a small sidearm, there was nothing left.

Images of the races and games flickered overhead on video monitors, announcers busily commenting and crowds cheering. Other than those voices, the room was silent, and all eyes were on him. He retrieved a small transparent vial from one of his belt pouches, dropping three of the bone shards inside before scooping up a bit of the ash. He pressed a stopper in place, sealing the container as he stood up. The stunned crowd silently parted, clearing a path to the door.

If this unlucky guy had seen him first, he might have run, but he would have just prolonged the inevitable and died tired. The holonet wanted poster that bore his image had clearly stated dead or alive. With that said, Fett knew all too well that Vader and the Emperor savored their trophies.

Shortly after his father's death, the new Emperor had given him a job, and paid handsomely for it. His first bounty had been the recovery of the broken and defeated body of Jedimaster Mace Windu. He had struggled with and dragged the almost unrecognizable corpse of his father's murderer from the dirty back streets of the surface of Coruscant. He dragged it in to claim his money and give the Emperor the first of many dead to occupy the grisly trophy room for slain Jedi beneath his carbonite prisoner meditation garden.

Since then, there had been so many others. Some bodies returned, some just ashes like this latest victim. Over the years, Vader had been none too happy about receiving a pile

The Sandtrooper's Story

of ashes for expected payment. The Dark Lord had a macabre need to see the bodies. He knew most of the victims; he needed to see that they were dead.

The bones rattled as he shook the vial and slipped it back in his belt pouch. The Empire would just have to identify the bone chips on this one.

He passed through the door out into the cool night air, thinking to himself. Spotting and identifying this loser had been the first favorable turn of events since his ship had been damaged on Yavin IV as he watched Solo slip away. The repair team he'd brought in had found the mangled outrigger torn off during pursuit of the 'Falcon, but they couldn't make repairs in the jungle. It took some time, but they were finally able to re-calibrate the one remaining outrigger to stabilize a short flight.

After limping here to Vorzyd V, the real repairs had begun. Fabrication of custom replacement parts were necessary, but taking too much time. He was losing money in unclaimed bounties. Until the ship was finished he knew there was little he could do, and had resigned himself to being stranded until repairs were complete. Thankfully, that time was almost upon him.

Two attractive, blue-skinned dancers passed by, eyeing him as he stepped into the street. He turned his head to admire them. He'd spent most of his time waiting in the bars and casinos, luckily his weakness for Twi'leks made it bearable.

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At some point in the still blackness of the pre-dawn hours, nightmares of Belliran V had once again awakened Rogue; terrifying nightmares of suffocation and death, trapped beneath endless piles of dead Ithorians. Unable to shake the memories and images from his head, he got up and set to work, anxious for the next day to begin so we could be on our way.

He filled the time while everyone else slept by leading the Eopies up from the pit, and raising the half-buried repulsor sleds to the surface. He fed and watered the animals, harnessing them to the sleds, readying them for the coming day.

Now everyone was awake and preparing to leave. There could be no fires or fusion furnaces this close to the fort; no detectable heat plumes could be risked. Etz chewed on a high energy ration bar and tossed one to Rogue as he walked by, heading for the forward dune position. He unwrapped it, and took a bite as he looked back over the men under his command and the civilians along for the ride. Diffused light had begun to chase away the darkness as daybreak drew nearer, but the suns had not yet risen, and in the ambience of the pre-dawn light, the sand beneath our feet took on a mystical glow.

The Sandtrooper's Story

Daegan packed his bag, never taking his eyes off Rogue as he made his way through the camp checking everyone's progress, continuing on to the forward dune.

Ddraig, 0600 and I were lining up the Eopies and sleds when Blade appeared, striding over the forward dunes' sandy crest heading toward Rogue.

"The herd's awake and some are starting to wander off. We need to get moving if we're going to follow them, but we need to do it quietly." He turned toward the mountains that rose up behind the fort. "You see that linear dune over there?" indicating a sandy ridgeline winding to the left side of the fort. "It goes past the mountains out to the open desert beyond. Several banthas were already heading along the side facing the fort."

Rogue nodded. "Yes, I see what you mean. That'll give us perfect cover. We'll follow on the back side of that dune line until we're beyond the mountains. You and Ddraig keep the herd in sight as they head that way. We'll catch up to you once we're out in the open. Keep your commlinks on."

"Yes, sir."

Blade turned and disappeared over the dune as Rogue motioned Etz, 0600 and Ddraig over to him. They assembled around him. "Get everyone ready to be on our way. We're leaving in five minutes. We'll be moving along the far side of that dune line." He indicated the ridge that snaked out to the open desert. "Tell them we're all to maintain absolute silence until we're beyond the mountains. Move it."

"Yes, sir" replied Ddraig, and they scattered.

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We had been walking in silence for a little over an hour when 4120 and Rogue, broke away from the head of the group, climbing to the top of the dune

The rest of us stopped walking while they moved up to check our position. They peered over the crest of the dune, spotting Ddraig and Blade just ahead.

Beyond them, a group of Banthas lumbered into the open dunefield of the 'Sea. As far beyond them as could be seen, the crests and valleys of countless dunes rose and fell, disappearing into the rippling heat waves off near the horizon.

The rest of the caravan crossed over the ridge, falling in line with Ddraig and Blade behind the slow-moving herd.

The Sandtrooper's Story

Daegan and Ash kept a close eye on the troops ahead as they cautiously spoke in hushed tones. Ash looked away toward the open desert. "Well, wasn't that the plan? Lay low with no communication?"

Daegan kept walking, staring straight ahead, eying Rogue carefully. "Yes. I mean, I know the mission was a success, they destroyed the station, but everyone in my strike team was supposed to have been contacted by now."

"Give it time" said Ash. "That mission generated a lot of heat. That's all got to die down."

Daegan shook his head. "I just have a bad feeling about it. It was our job to steal the information and pass it to wave two on Toprawa. After that, we scattered and hid, just like we planned. Wave two transmitted the data to the Alliance from there and were supposed to disappear for a while and then signal everyone in wave one. Something must have gone wrong, otherwise I'd have heard from Bria by now. I just hope . . ."

Ash quietly shushed him as Etz came walking past toward the rear of the column. Both continued walking in silence.

The hours silently slipped by as we followed the herd further and further into the 'Sea. It was mid afternoon when I turned back to check our progress against a landmark, only to discover that the mountains and fort were almost completely gone from view. I pulled the stopper from my canteen and took a drink. I never had cared for the water from my backpack, and as long as I had fresh water, I'd decided to drink that first.

A fine spray of sand whipped across the ground, forming and re-forming delicate ripple patterns on the untouched landscape. Most of the dunes out here in the open were hundreds of meters tall, more like sandy foothills than mere dunes. This place was as raw and beautiful as it was deadly.

Toward the middle of the procession, between two of the sleds, Falker walked quietly beside 'Lina. Finally he looked over to her and broke the silence with a question. "So, do you know anything about that fort? I thought the Tusken Raiders were cave-dwellers. Did they build that place?"

"No." began 'Lina, shaking her head. "The Sandpeople didn't build it, they stole it. Part of my research here is Ghorfa history."

"Ghorfa?" asked Falker.

She grinned. "Ghorfa is the proper name of their race, but they're known as Sandpeople for obvious reasons." She brushed her hair from her face, trying to distill everything she knew about them down to a concise, yet interesting level.

The Sandtrooper's Story

“The fort itself was actually built by settlers from Bestine IV, who named it ‘Fort Tusken’ after an island on their homeworld.”

A wind gust blew her hair into her face. She reached up, brushing it away as they continued walking.

“About two years after it was built, the Ghorfa clans united and led raiding parties to the fort. The attacks they led were relentless, and sporadically went on for nearly three years until the settlers finally abandoned it.”

“Nice of them to be so friendly” said Falker.

“It was those attacks that earned the Sandpeople the nickname *Tusken Raiders*” she continued.

“Briefly during the Galactic Civil War they lost control of the fort to a group of moisture farmers and the mercenaries they had hired to help recapture the fort. Unfortunately, it was short-lived. A union of the Ghorfa clans mercilessly attacked in numerous waves and reclaimed the fort.”

Stopping in her tracks, she looked off across the sand, then over to Miren. “Actually, would you like to hear a recording of one of those moisture farmers?”

“Sure.” Said Falker, wondering what she might produce from her bag.

“Miren? Miren, come here” she called out.

Miren stopped walking and just waited for them to catch up to her.

“Hey, do you have the sound clip I jacked out of that recorder? Remember?” asked ‘Lina.

“Jacked out?” asked Falker.

Lina smiled again and Miren rolled her eyes as she reached into her bag and handed over the recorder. “Yeah, we were looking through some stuff at a Jawa junk sale when I found it. They wanted way too much for the beat up old recorder, but I really wanted the message I’d found on it, so while Miren distracted them, I jacked in and moved the file over to her recorder.”

He flashed a reproachful look.

“What?” she asked innocently. “The message has historical value, and they can still sell the recorder. No harm done.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

She selected the recording from a menu and pressed the button to play it. Nothing happened; there was no sound at all. She pressed the play button again several times, but the recording would not begin.

“Did you break the recorder, Miren? I can't get it to play now.”

The silence that followed was broken by Rogue as he walked back along the line of people, addressing everyone. “An old bull and cow have stopped to bed down for the night. The rest of their herd is moving on without them. We're going to stop here for the night and follow the older members tomorrow. They're our best bet of being led to the recording.”

He continued on past them, giving the directions again for those further down the line.

Frustrated, Lina stuffed the recorder in her bag. “I'll look at it once we get settled down for the night. When I figure out what's wrong with it, we can listen.”

“Ddraig and Deckard have been working on an astromech back at our base. I'm sure they could help with it if you want.”

She nodded as they headed forward to the selected camp site.

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Rogue connected the commlink to the pulsing fusion generator and switched it on. There was no static, no sound at all. He looked at it disgusted.

4120, who stood beside him offered an observation. “It probably has to BE charged to work, not actively being charged.”

Rogue switched it off and laid it beside the generator. “I'll let it sit overnight and try them again in the morning.”

Topolev poked at the dying fire in the center of camp, and added another compressed fuel core. The hour was late when Ddraig finally managed to get Miren's recorder to work. Lina hugged him enthusiastically, grabbed the recorder and invited him to watch. He followed her over to where Falker was stretched out.

“It's working! Ddraig got it to work” she said excitedly. “There's no holo image or even a video feed, only audio, but it gets the point across.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

The two troopers watched as 'Lina selected the recording from a menu, pressed a button and the rough, static-filled recording began to play.

I cocked my head to one side and listened to the nearly forgotten voice on the recording.

"We've finally managed to fight off the remaining Sand People from Fort Tusken. As the last one fell, I was overwhelmed with profound pride as the fortress had at last been recovered from the hands of the foul murderers who have soiled its halls for so long. I look forward to sending word to... what's this... another wave of Tusken Raiders has appeared! They seem to fight with renewed vigor and have reinforced their numbers with much more powerful warriors this time. Perhaps my thoughts of victory are far too premature . . ."

At that point, the recording completely filled with static and stopped. We all sat in silence, mentally replaying the snippet in our heads, realizing the moisture farmer's captured words were probably his last.

"You three should get some rest" I said, settling back down on my bed roll. "Morning comes early out here, and we move out when the Banthas do."

'Lina nodded. Ddraig helped her up and they each went back to their makeshift beds.

A brief slash of light seared across the sky overhead. Without thinking, I made a wish, the way my parents had shown me when I was little. I opened my eyes, staring at the darkness where the light had been, memories of that faraway place and person flooding in.

Closing my eyes, I willed myself to sleep.

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