

Chapter 36 – Unforeseen

It was somewhere between mid-morning and noon and the heat was already reaching near unbearable levels. The Banthas course had been parallel with a chain of hills to our left, following the ridgeline to stay up where the air was moving. A change in the dune pattern forced man and beast alike to climb the high sandy mounds and descend into the deathly still valleys between them, the heat of which very nearly sucked the breath from your lungs. What little reprieve we had seen in recent days had abated in favor of more torturous temperatures.

We in the 104th were somewhat protected by thermal suits, but our guide and the civilian entourage of archaeologists lacking such equipment required more frequent stops to rest, cool down and take a drink. Fluids were flowing out of them almost as quickly as they were being replaced.

We pressed on until just beyond midday, when the suns began their customary decline in the afternoon sky. This time we stopped for water and lunch.

As the others relaxed under makeshift shades and pulled food rations and water from the supply sleds, I took a good long look at where we were, not just the next foot placement ahead in the sand. I shielded my eyes and turned completely around, realizing that the mountains, all landmarks of any kind for that matter, had seemingly fallen off the edge of the planet and we were very much alone, adrift in the 'Sea. We were midway up the slowly inclined slope of a dune with limited visibility directly ahead, but there was only sand as far as you could see in any other direction.

0600 and 4120 watered the animals, then made their way to the food and water station set up by Etz. I slipped my canteen under the water nozzle and filled the container to the top, grabbed a ration bag and sat down in the sand with my back against the supply sled.

I had just taken a drink and bitten off a second piece of Ronto jerky when a small swarm of tiny, sand-colored animals came racing over the ridge of the dune, down its face, and straight through our small group of travelers without so much as a second thought.

Miren and 'Lina quickly clambered on top of one of the sleds to get away from them. Zu just unholstered her pistol and took several shots at them, little sand plumes spraying up where the missed blast points hit.

Sandie was laughing hysterically at the little creatures and dancing around to the strains of unheard music flowing through his head.

“Scurriers!” yelled 0600. He quickly pulled the rifle off his shoulder and squeezed off several shots, hitting nearly as many of the tiny beasts. “That’ll taste a lot better than this protein bar, that’s for sure.”

“Scurriers?” I asked.

The Sandtrooper's Story

He looked over my way. "Yeah. You haven't seen them around the spaceport?"

I shook my head. "No."

"They're basically desert rats, but pretty tasty when cooked properly" grinned 0600 as he took aim again. "Usually they steer clear of humans" he said, turning to eye the dune they had come scampering over. "I wonder what they were running away from in such a hurry." He lowered his rifle without firing again, and walked the rest of the distance to the crest of the dune to have a look at the other side. I followed him up the grade.

I was a few steps behind, and still climbing when he dropped to his knees, shading his eyes from the sun's glare. When I reached his side, we both saw what had driven them our way.

An enormous Jawa sandcrawler lumbered slowly along the floor of the next valley. Its treads clanked noisily but efficiently, propelling the massive 'crawler forward at a slow, steady pace. A handful of Jawas walked beside it, shooting at the fleeing scurries. Several larger, dead furry beasts hung from the lower handrails along the side of the desert transport.

"See those?" 0600 asked.

"Yeah."

"Those are Womprats; nasty things. There must be some ahead somewhere. We'll have to keep our eyes open."

He must have seen the confusion on my face because he asked, "Did you think we were alone out here? I saw you lookin' around back there."

I nodded slightly.

He chuckled. "Besides heat and constant change, the Dune Sea is a master of deception. With the height and length of the dunes out here, you begin to lose perspective of relative size and distance. Someone could sneak up on you and you'd never see them coming; they'd look like nothing more than a small speck against the sand."

He started to walk back down to the rest of the group, then stopped and turned back to me. "You have to really be concentrating hard to see them."

I was following him back, walking between the others in our party heading back to my helmet and supplies, and stopped to grab an energy bar from one of the sleds. While I looked for one, I overheard Felth's voice crackling through on Rogue's commlink.

The Sandtrooper's Story

“That’s correct, sir. There was no one in either ship, and no sign of 1265. I’m sorry it took so long to get back to you, but I thought it pertinent to conduct a thorough sweep of both ships, the bays and the surrounding areas within the spaceport to be certain, but there wasn’t a single trace of Kaird or Guri.”

Rogue sat a moment, staring off into the dunes. “Good work, Felth. Get back to base, and contact me if you hear from 1265. I’ll be in touch.”

“Yes sir.”

Rogue switched off the comm, and was getting to his feet as I closed the lid on the ration crate. “Deck, let’s get everyone down the line ready to push on.” He tucked the comm back in his belt. “We’re on the trail again in ten minutes. I want to catch up with the Banthas before they stop for the night. And keep your eyes open.”

I took a bite of the bar. “Yes sir.”

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Felth switched off his commlink, placing it down on the bench as he returned to the damaged Republic Commando helmet he had been working on from down in the cache.

He pressed a small chin switch control inside and tilted the helmet slightly so he could more easily see the video playback on the tiny screen inside.

Images splashed across the screen, revealing a previously unrecovered piece of Holder’s puzzle.

Felth’s mind raced and he was lost in thought as the video ended.

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Artoo’s systems flashed online, and the little ‘droid woke up, still secured in the socket of his master’s X-wing fighter. Luke had activated the ship’s converters, which alerted the blue astromech, awakening it and the ship’s entire system from an extended idle time power save shutdown.

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The snub ships of Renegade flight were falling into formation as the platform's crew brought the *ALLANTRID*'s repaired reactor online. All appeared to be going fine, and main engine tests were to begin momentarily.

Then, Commander Narra's voice came through everyone's headsets

"Renegade Flight, this is Renegade leader. I'm getting some interference on my sensors. Maintain close visual scanning. Renegade 4 stay closer to your transport ship."

"I copy boss."

Narra's voice broke through again. "Transport ships keep close together. Luke, get them into hyperspace once they're clear of Derra IV's gravity field. Fighters stick close to the convoy and keep your eyes open, all of you."

"Roger that, Commander" replied Luke, speeding off toward the lead transport.

"Renegade Leader, this is Renegade 7. Boss, I have a visual sighting of a number of small craft coming at high velocity from the far side of the planet."

"Can you identify them?" Narra countered.

"They're moving awfully fast."

Suddenly, cockpit alarms were triggered.

"Imperial TIE fighters, sir, must be 20 of 'em."

"Renegade flight this is Renegade leader, engage, engage, engage! Transport ships you're clear to jump to hyperspace as soon as you have viable coordinates."

"This is Renegade 3, boss there's another bunch of them dead ahead in our course. They're breaking for attack."

"This is Renegade 2, more TIEs approaching from Sector II, they're all over the place! Here they come!"

The *ALLANTRID*'s engines fired to life, and the huge transport vessel began to slowly pull away from the platform.

"Renegade 3,4, 5 and 6 get up there and clear the way for Commander Skywalker and the transports. The rest of you protect the convoy. Luke, make sure they get away or we're done."

With Luke flying escort, the transport ships ran for it, throttling up to maximum acceleration.

The Sandtrooper's Story

Narra's eyes swept over the incoming swarm of TIE fighters. "All right renegade flight, let's hit 'em."

Chatter filled Luke's headset as he rolled to one side, vaporizing a TIE that had broken away from the others toward the transports under his protection.

"Watch it renegade 2!"

"I see 'em."

"On your tail, Renegade 7!" yelled Narra. "Scissor right, scissor RIGHT!"

"Here I come."

"Get 'em off me!"

"Gah! Boss we can't stop 'em there are too many."

"Boss they're going after the *ALLANTRID* and the others. They're going to . . ." An explosion followed by silence completed his sentence, as his ship was destroyed.

"Protect the transports! They have to get through!" yelled Narra.

The two lead transports pulled away from the fighting and slipped into hyperspace headed for Hoth. Once he was sure they were clear, Luke followed them. He didn't want to leave the battle, but if there was an ambush here, there could just as easily be one at Hoth waiting for them. Behind him, above Derra IV, the battle raged on surrounding the remaining transports.

A brilliant explosion lit up the darkness outside their cockpits as one of the lumbering transports was destroyed. It was immediately followed by another massive flare and shockwave as the reactor of a second transport was pierced by enemy fire, ripping the ship apart. Renegade Flight scanned the areas around them, but neither had time for deployment of any escape pods.

"Boss, they're all over us, they just got Transports 3 and 4."

"This is Renegade 2. I'm hit! I'm hit! I lost both port-side engines!"

"Keep going" yelled Narra.

"This is Renegade 3, there are four TIE's on me, somebody help me, I can't shake 'em."

Renegade 2 pulled his damaged ship between the TIEs and Renegade 3, firing on and destroying two Imperial ships before spiraling headlong out of control into a third.

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Several fireballs erupted against the blackness.

“Renegade 3???” screamed Narra.

Only static rolled back through his headset. “Renegade 2?”

“They’re gone, boss. There’s no way out, they’re all around us.”

“Boss, there’s a bunch of em headed your way.”

“All ships this is Commander Narra. Break contact and escape if you can. Break contact and run for”

Static replaced Narra’s voice over the headsets of those remaining in Renegade Flight Wing.

“Boss!?” screamed Renegade 7. He rolled his ship around just in time to see the fireball that had been their Commander fading to black. He keyed his comm, “Narra is gone; I repeat, Narra is gone. The transports are all burning or destroyed. Renegade Flight, scatter and re-group at the rendezvous point.”

The few remaining ships each quickly plotted a hyperspace jump away from the onslaught, leaving behind the burning wreckage of transports and friends among their crews.

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On this third day out from Fort Tusken, the morning had broken as it had the previous days, and we’d followed the two old Banthas further and further away from any hint of civilization into the interior of the Dune Sea.

The days, though still hot, were more tolerable and nights were becoming cooler as temperatures in general had begun to drop. Most friendly conversation enjoyed during the earlier days of the journey had now been played out and we were all acutely aware of remaining focused enough to simply place one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward.

It was afternoon when the crushing glare reflecting off the near-white sand beneath our feet began to dim almost imperceptibly as we followed our eccentric guide deeper still into the ‘Sea. We were marching single file away from the suns, following the old Banthas out ahead of us when the light winds we had enjoyed since morning suddenly

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died away to a still, silent calm. A dark shadow fell across the sand as the twin suns behind us were suddenly and totally eclipsed.

Rogue snapped his head back to look. Instead of the blazing fireballs he expected to see, an enormous, towering wall of boiling darkness several hundred meters high, stretching from one edge of the horizon to the other, was raging across the dunes, heading straight toward us.

“SANDSTORM!” he yelled, reflexively breaking into an urgent sprint.

Everyone turned to look back at the churning sand heading our way as he raced to unhitch two of the closest hover sleds from their Eopie harnesses. He dragged them side by side and switched off their repulsor fields. Both slammed into the sand, creating a two-meter high barrier between the approaching storm and us.

‘Lina’s mouth fell open in disbelief, Miren just stared, and Zu pulled the shiny blue goggles off her eyes, raising them in stunned disbelief to her forehead, whispering “Oh shit!”

Immediately we broke formation, shouldering our rifles and running, backtracking down both sides of the animal caravan.

The roar of the approaching storm was undeniable and escalating quickly. It was as if the subtly changing dunes had become enraged by our unwanted presence, rising up in a churning cloud of protesting fury, rolling over any and all that dared venture this deep into the vastness of the ‘Sea. Tendrils of lightning violently lashed out from within the cloud, twisting jaggedly into the darkening sky.

“Deck, get help from them.” I saw 4120 pointing to the archaeologists as he yelled to be heard over the increasing roar of the wind. “Get the rest of the animals over to Rogue’s position! Danz! You three grab those sleds and get them over here; move it! It’s almost on top of us!”

“C’mon!” I yelled. Members of the research team raced back to help me, scattering to control the spooked Eopies and centralize the gear toward where I had last seen Rogue.

As he ran to help gather everyone together, Danz noticed how this storm dwarfed the one out at the Lars homestead. Blade and Etz helped him lead six Eopies toward the makeshift shelter Rogue had started. They unhitched the remaining repulsor sleds, dragging them into position on either end, creating a curved barrier wall.

We took the tethers, corralling the freed animals into a group, lashing them to one of the provision crates behind our makeshift wall. As we did so, Ereka, Ash and Daegan helped 0600, Falker and Ddraig unload and lift a small shield generator to the top of the center sled and brace it as he worked to start it up. I herded ‘Lina, Miren, Doc and Zu behind the

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crates as they worked. Etz, Danz and Blade moved in behind us as the leading edge of the storm bore down on us.

Sand churned furiously around us now, hurled on the gusting winds of the ever-darkening sky as we all took cover behind the barrier. The spooked pack animals bent their long legs and lowered themselves to the ground, where they proceeded to shove their heads into the sand beside the sleds, bracing themselves.

Danz sat down with his back to the wall, pulling on his helmet, "I almost died in a flood of water once as a kid back on Bestine IV." He yelled. "I never thought in a million years I'd die in a flood of sand."

With his back to one of the sleds, Sandie wrapped cloth around his face and over his head. "Stay put and keep your heads down, and nobody's gonna die!"

"Get that shield going, hurry up!" yelled Rogue to be heard over the howling winds.

4120 crowded in beside me now. I turned to look through a narrow crack between the sleds, watching as the landscape changed before my eyes. Dunes eroded into valleys, as what had been familiar was now completely foreign.

Suddenly, small orbs of bright light about a meter across began to appear, rising out of the ground sand as I watched. The blowing sand popped and sizzled, sparking along their edges as they continued expanding to several meters across, steadily growing in intensity until each suddenly ejected a jagged web of energy, arcing up into the sky to merge with a connecting bolt of lightning slashing down from within the cloud in a deafening blast.

"Did you see that?" I yelled

"Ball lightning!" yelled Sandie, nodding. "Very dangerous!"

Then, through the blasting sand, a darker shape began to appear.

I lost sight of it as the full fury of the storm was upon us now, blowing a near solid curtain of sand between us and whatever it was. The roar was deafening and the sky grew dark. Sand immediately built up against the wall of sleds and crates, rising higher and higher, creating a new dune as it covered the equipment. I felt the weight of the deepening sand on my body increasing as I was buried further and further. I closed my eyes, worried more manifestations of ball lightning might suddenly rise out of the sand beneath us.

0600 yelled to the others with him, "That's it, get down, I'm starting it up."

The five others dropped below the level of the sleds, and 0600 threw the activation switch, dropping down behind them.

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As he did, an energy dome spread out from the top of the shield generator, extending out to a circumference of roughly eight meters, completely containing the animals and us. The stinging sandblast abruptly halted as the protective barrier of the shield dropped all the way to the ground, intervening between the air-born sand and us.

Immediately, sand began building up against the outside of the energy wall. As the winds howled fiercely, we watched the collecting sand creep higher and higher up the outside of the power membrane, diminishing what little light there was. One of the Eopies brayed and snorted anxiously from behind the archaeologists as the sand finally covered the energy dome, plunging us until total blackness.

After what felt like hours trapped in the cramped darkness, the snarling winds finally passed, and the roar of the flying sand subsided.

When there was absolute silence outside, 0600 stepped up onto the platform of the repulsor sled, and reached up, switching off the shield generator.

As he did, a shower of sand fell on us from the roof above as the thin energy membrane dissolved, and the darkness we were in was suddenly broken. Light from the suns filtered through the swirling dusty haze that filled our pit, and a small trickling of sand tumbled in on all sides, sliding into what had become a crater in the altered landscape above.

0600 carefully climbed the rest of the way up and stepped off the top of the supply sled to the newly formed ground level above. "Hey Rogue? 4120? Get up here."

Our command team glanced momentarily at each other and then hurried up over the packed crates on the supply sled to the surface above. As they stepped onto the sand they saw 0600 about ten meters away, standing in front of a once-hidden desert secret that the fury of the sandstorm had seen fit to reveal.

Both men were speechless.

The others of us below in the crater curiously followed their lead, quickly scrambling up the contents of the sled out of the hole to the surface. The air was noticeably cooler now, in the wake of the storm.

As he climbed out, Doc pushed the crimson lenses of his goggles up on his forehead. "Oh my."

As I stepped up beside him, I realized this was what I had seen emerging from beneath the sands of the adjacent dune. The others followed behind me.

Sandie and everyone in both teams stood silently, staring past Rogue and 4120 as 0600 walked with helmet in hand, toward the huge, gleaming metallic hull of the medium range starship that lay before them, half submerged in the lapping sands of the Dune Sea. He reached out a gloved hand and touched the brilliant, silvery skin of the downed vessel.

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Etz took a step closer, squinting. "She's so shiny!"

Blade walked up beside him. "The winds out here have been sand-blasting this thing for who knows how long. She must have gone down and been buried in a sandstorm or the Jawas would have found her; picked her clean by now."

Rogue leaned closer to 4120. "A medium range ship? This far out from a major port? They must have come in for a low level, low visibility approach to the spaceport, or outlying area, and gone down in a storm."

"I wonder what they were hauling?" said 4120, scratching beneath the frayed synth-skin where his arm met his mechanical hand; perspiration rolling off his forehead.

Etz and Ddraig walked up beside them as Rogue answered. "Probably smugglers of some sort; could be anything really, but most likely weapons, medical supplies or spice."

4120 perked up a bit. He glanced skyward, noting how late it had become. "We should probably make camp here tonight. By the time we get everything ready to move out, it'll be time to stop for the day anyway."

Rogue nodded in silent agreement.

"What about the animals?" asked Ddraig.

"We could just leave them down in the pit until we adjust the hoversled repulsors to raise them up here to the surface. It'll act like a natural pen," offered Etz, looking to Rogue, who again nodded his approval.

Sandie stepped up close to Rogue; a little too close for Rogue's liking, and he took a step back. The pungent old man took a step closer to once again close the gap between himself and Rogue. He leaned close, whispering through his scruffy beard. "What about the Banthas? We need to find them again. I don't mind moving ahead with a scout team to try and . . ."

Rogue cut him short, "The bull and cow most likely kept moving through the storm to keep from being buried. Don't worry; we put trackers on the older ones after we left Fort Tusken. They'll be bedding down for the night soon. We'll find them in the morning."

Sandie's eye twitched a bit at having been shut down, and he hurried away, muttering to himself.

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