

Chapter 37 – All That We Must Leave Behind

As darkness blanketed the frozen surface of Hoth, temperatures fell beyond the range of bodily discomfort, and bordered on that of true danger.

Frigid winds whipped around Solo and a half dozen of Rogue group's pilots standing beside their ships. The 'Falcon and a handful of X and Y-wings had been moved outside the main base hangar, allowing the new Ion Cannon's reactor a broad path from the outer shield doors all the way to the oversized turbolift at the back of the ice cavern.

Han and the others wore protective goggles and extreme thermal gear, and still all were shivering in the painful wake of the night winds. Each gust piercing their gear, chilling them to their cores.

Chewbacca grunted nervously to Solo, throwing his head slightly to the left in the direction of the ships. The Corellian smuggler swept his eyes over the hulls of the snubships and the 'Falcon. All were sporting a thick layer of frost and ice that thickened as he watched. He glanced back at the Wook, nodding before herding the pilots into his ship to wait it out.

Peering through the white haze of horizontally blowing snow, from just inside the shield doors, Mon Mothma and the last of Alderaan's royal family stood watching the progress. Leia was able to make out the shapes of two large transport ships hovering just above the frozen ground, beyond where Solo and Rogue group were gathered. External covers on the transports had been retracted, exposing the precious cargo within; cargo that Luke had been able to escort here safely, delivered at the cost of Commander Narra's life and the lives of many members of Renegade flight. The war continued to chip away; taking, always taking.

Several crews were busily offloading components for the one remaining stolen Ion Cannon. The twin to this defense gun had been lost when the Allatrid evaporated above Derra IV. From the second transport, two other teams simultaneously worked to retrieve the partially dismantled reactor that would supply its power. The princess watched Luke unloading the hardware as Yané and Torynn stepped up beside her.

The one-time handmaiden from Naboo dipped her head slightly, lowering her eyes as she addressed the princess, "Your highness."

Leia watched as they both bowed. Her life in the royal house seemed a lifetime ago, and yet, without thinking, the royal grooming she had been endlessly taught as a child effortlessly found its way back to her. "Rise."

Both women raised their heads as Leia introduced Mon Mothma. Immediately, both women lowered their heads in a show of respect.

Yané peered into Leia's eyes, "Your highness, this is Torynn Farr. She's a communications expert that will be working with you in the Command Center, who shares the loss of your homeworld. She too lost her family on Alderaan."

The Sandtrooper's Story

Yané's eyes pleaded "I thought perhaps you could meet and become acquainted as kindred souls, to help support each other."

Leia nodded "Hello Torynn, I'm pleased to meet a fellow survivor." She turned back to the handmaiden, "Will you both excuse us for a moment?" The two women stepped several yards away from Yané and Mon, speaking of Alderaan and remembering their home.

Mon watched Yané watching them. "That was a nice thing you did."

Yané turned to her. "The poor girl is grief-stricken, and feeling isolated by her pain. She desperately needs someone who understands her loss."

Mon glanced at Leia, smiling softly "And what about Torynn, how is she?" She cut her eyes back to Yané.

The handmaiden lowered her head slightly, smiling herself.

Mon continued "There's been precious little to no time for it, but Leia hasn't allowed herself to grieve the losses she's endured either. Having someone that shares that loss will do her some good."

Yané looked off toward the two daughters of Alderaan "That's what I had hoped."

"And what is your position here on the base?" asked Mon.

Yané was unprepared for that question. The blank searching in her eyes spoke volumes as she turned to the rebel leader, silently locking eyes. "I've only just arrived, and don't really know what my future holds. I can't really go home, and . . . well, I don't know."

"I didn't mean to put you on the spot" said Mon. "Where was home, and why can't you return there? What did you do there?"

"I'm from Naboo" Yané offered. "For many years I served the royal house as handmaiden. As a young woman I served with Queen Amidala, and grew older with Queen Jamilla."

Upon hearing Amidala's name, Mon's eyes grew a bit wider as her glance cut to Leia. The princess was unknowingly in the presence of one of her mother's most trusted confidants.

They both took a step to the side as crew members began moving reactor parts past them on enormous repulsor sleds toward the rear turbolift.

Yané continued. "Captain Solo was kind enough to fulfill a promise to my half sister. I had given a necklace to my young niece when she was a child. She and her husband kept it safe while Bria was away; kept it, awaiting her return. When she didn't come back from her last mission, he gave it to Solo, begging him to deliver it to me with the news of her passing."

The Sandtrooper's Story

She touched the necklace against her chest. “While Solo was with me in Theed, the Empire seized control of the capital, looking for him. I helped him escape.” She clutched the pendant tighter now. “My lovely Bria . . .”

Mon’s eyes flashed back to her as thoughts raced through her head; thoughts of Leia somehow piecing things together, of the deliberate protective deception unraveling before it was time. “Bria? Not Bria Tharen?”

Yané looked puzzled. “The same. How did you . . .”

Mon’s eyes lit up as a smile of recognition took control of her face. “I’m so very sorry for your loss. Bria Tharen was responsible for transmitting the technical plans for the Death Star to the Princess from an Imperial communications tower on Toprawa. The plans she provided to us saved the Rebellion and an untold number of lives across the galaxy. Your niece was a hero.”

“That’s my Bria” answered Yané, staring at the pendant. “This is all I have left of her now.”

Mon glanced outside at the last of the equipment being moved inside. “This might seem a bit sudden, but would you consider working with me? I’ve just lost my aide of many years to a horrible accident and I’m quite lost without her. Your background would make you a perfect fit, and it would honor what Bria was fighting for, if you’re interested.”

Yané rolled it over in her mind as Leia and Torynn came walking back.

Torynn smiled as the princess continued speaking, “I’d like that. It’s been too long since I’ve heard the anthem play, and I’m sure we have so much more to talk about.” As Leia turned back to the others, she saw the look on Yané’s face and could feel they had interrupted something. “Is everything all right?” She looked to Mon.

The handmaiden nodded, smiling “Yes, everything’s fine. I’ve just agreed to join the Rebellion as Mon Mothma’s new aide.”

All four women smiled, and congratulations were given as the ice-encrusted ships of Rogue Squadron flew slowly past into the base, the engines’ roar drowning out their words. The sunships were followed by the deep-frozen Millennium Falcon with Chewbacca at her controls. Luke followed Han on foot through the massive hangar entrance a moment later and continued on with the crew to the turbolift. Along the way he gave a nod to the control booth. The shield doors lurched, and began their slow journey closed.

Solo walked up to where the ladies were gathered, opening the front of his parka. He threw back his hood and pulled off the frosted goggles, revealing his red face. As he did, the shield doors closed together with a slam and locked behind him. “The others’ll dock the transports and come in through the south entrance.” He glanced back at the doors, unleashing his lopsided smile. “I wouldn’t want to be caught on the wrong side of them. A night out there, in those freezing winds, it’d be a death sentence for sure.”

The Sandtrooper's Story

Leia rolled her eyes and shook her head as the women turned and walked away from him, continuing their conversation.

He pulled off his gloves, watching them go, then walked to where the 'Falcon had come to rest. He wasn't used to such rejection when he was being so charming. His co-pilot descended the boarding ramp, grunting and groaning a few words his way, leaning his head to one side as he barked the last word.

Solo shook his head as he walked up the ramp. "Buddy, de-icing the 'Falcon'll be easy." He paused beside the Wook cutting his eyes toward the princess. "But I've got a better chance of thawing out this whole planet than I do of thawing her out" and he disappeared inside.

The Wook woofed a slight laugh before following him in.

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Rogue closed the supply crate of rations, latching it down tight. "I know you think we should investigate the ship, but we don't have time to do it properly right now. We can tag it and come back when we've found the recording." He looked up at the shiny hull "We'll come back when we can do it right. There are too many things that could go wrong, especially with these civilians along for the ride" and he walked away.

They had just finished their evening meal and everyone was eagerly making a place to bed down after the long day.

4120 sighed, then looked up into the darkening sky. The last streaks of light were disappearing below the horizon and the black of night was closing in quickly. He turned his head to watch Rogue go. He'd just have to wait.

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The still of the night covered them like a blanket. A cool, gentle wind lightly blew at the storm-loosened surface sand.

When he was sure everyone was asleep, 4120 quietly pulled his empty gear bag off one of the supply sleds in the pit and carefully made his way to the side of the ship. He located a mechanical number pad beside the main lateral hatch.

Quietly he depressed one button, then another and another in the universal emergency rescue combination. Each button remained depressed until the last digit was entered, then all seven sprang back flush with the ship's skin. As they snapped out, the end of a lever arm popped out.

The Sandtrooper's Story

He glanced around to make sure no one had heard, then turned back to the hatch. Gripping the lever arm, he pulled down slowly and firmly, feeling a mechanical release somewhere inside. As it disengaged, the hatch was pulled slightly into the side of the ship and opened in to the left. Sand poured into the lower portion of the doorway, as the bottom quarter of it was below the surface.

4120 took one last look around the camp and stepped into the darkness within. He moved into the airlock, powering up a small luminary on his belt when he noticed that the inner door seal was already broken. He stepped through and past a withered body in a flight suit still gripping the inner release arm for the airlock. The sunken face was emaciated, dried out; mummified. He turned away from the nameless victim and made his way to a central corridor, turning into it, heading for the rear of the ship.

Walking half on the pitched bulkhead wall and half on the deck to maintain his balance, he moved along the dim, sloping hallway, carefully stepping over another mummified corpse in a flight suit. He moved slowly, with his back armor sliding along the wall of the slowly descending corridor until finally he came to two hatches; one on the left side of the hall and the other opposite it on the right.

He was familiar with this style of ship and decided that based on their position, these were most likely twin cargo holds straddling the central corridor spine that ran all the way to the engine room.

Not thinking, he reached out and pressed a control button beside the first door, expecting the hatch to slide open. Of course it didn't. The battery cores had undoubtedly been drained long ago.

Immediately realizing his mistake, he reached out with his free hand running a gloved fingertip along the edge of the door until he found a slight indentation in the deteriorating seal. Wondering if it was locked, he pushed a fingertip between it and the frame and slid the door open a few inches, smiling at his luck. Pushing his shoulder into the small opening he'd made, he was able to slide the heavy, shielded door aside.

Inside he could see empty shipping crates, miscellaneous mechanical parts and empty cargo nets hooked on the wall; nothing in there.

Was that a sound?

Whipping his head around, he peered back down the long hall to make sure no one had followed him in. Once confident he was alone, he turned to the other cargo door across the dark hall, forcing it open the same way he had its twin.

He scratched at the red skin above his synthetic wrist stump as his eyes swept over the contents of the room. Several black metallic canisters lay open and scattered across the floor. Hundreds of small bundles in dark, light-shielding wrappings were strewn across the deck.

The Sandtrooper's Story

A slight twitch formed in the corner of his left eye as he realized he'd found the main cargo of the ill-fated flight. There was more spice here than he could fit in the emptied gear bag he held. He turned back, checking the hallway once more, then stepped through the threshold of the open hatch toward the awaiting spice.

Just inside the compartment, at about knee height, a sand-weathered sensor lens flickered imperceptibly to life as he tripped the motion sensor of a time-weary security system. The light behind the lens flashed dimly several times, followed by a substantial creak and groaning in the wall as the ancient hatch began to slide closed.

He spun around as the hatch slammed shut; mechanical locks firing into place, sealing him in.

The moment the door secured, sirens screeched out their loud, wailing cry of danger, echoing off the metal walls of the rotting ship and white strobing lights filled the compartment, flashing across his armor, revealing the sudden terror in his face. His hands moved frantically over the bulkhead around the door looking for a release, but the control box had been removed and a flat plate of metal had been welded in its place.

Without warning, rushing jets of iridescent pink gas streamed from security nozzles in the ceiling, clouding the room.

Turning his blaster around, he slammed the butt into the transparisteel window in the door several times. It bounced back, leaving the unyielding pane defiantly intact. He coughed as the gas began to fill the room.

Suddenly a null gravity security device kicked in, and he lost his footing as he lifted off the floor along with the rest of the cargo. The strobing, staccato lights made his rapid movements appear jerky, and nauseated him; or was that the gas? He turned his head into his arm, coughing again, this time expelling a fine spray of blood across the white of his armor. Wrapped packages of spice floated around him in the billowing pink clouds.

The gas was definitely a highly caustic irritant that burned his skin, and he began coughing violently as it burned deep inside his lungs. Now floating upside down, he un-holstered his blaster, flipped off the safety, leveled it at the hatch and fired. The recoil rolled him over backwards and the bright flash lit up the pink gas momentarily. The blaster bolt slammed into the door with a flash, immediately ricocheting off, flying past his head and searing a smoking hole in a shipping container on the other side of the room.

"Magnetically shielded. Not good." He released the blaster, which spun in the air and disappeared away into the expanding pink fog.

Twisting in the air, he coughed again; spraying out more blood. He was in serious trouble unless someone outside found him, and fast.

The Sandtrooper's Story

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The heat absorbed under the constant beating of the twin suns had at last released itself from the top layers of sand, surrendering to the cool of the breeze. Our small band of travelers and animals had all finally settled for the night; each finding a place and position of relative comfort for sleeping.

The immense, black sky above was adorned with a tapestry of stars trailing off into the infinite reaches of space. The thin slivers of the two visible moons hung just above the horizon and threw too little light to spoil the view. High up in the atmosphere, several meteors burned by in short-lived, fiery streaks.

I sat leaning back on a bank of sand mounded up against one of the ship's exposed wings, staring out into the dunes. I was having trouble sleeping, and remembering the time spent submerged in black Anoat sewers looking for Moff Rebus; remembering how I had wished for somewhere dry to be. I knew as I watched the sky overhead, recounting the events of the day, that this place was certainly the other end of that wish. Working and living in Mos Eisley didn't give you an appreciation for just how desolate and dangerous this planet truly was, even more so than Dantooine on its worst day.

As I sat thinking, another flash ignited in the upper atmosphere overhead. This one grew larger and brighter, streaking past in a long arc, striking the ground in a brilliant impact and shower of sparks. I quickly grabbed for my macrobinoculars, training them on the distant glow. It was too far away to see more than just a light, but I marked the location into the macro's memory.

It was roughly straight ahead on our caravan's present heading. Maybe in a day or two, if we remained on this course, we might be close enough for me to check it out. I lowered the macros, turning around to see if the noise had awakened anyone. The Eopies were stirring somewhat, and Topolev was rolling over to change positions, but otherwise, the camp was quiet.

Doc and the rest of the diggers slept around the supply sleds. Sandie was stretched out on the ground near the animals. Most of the others were in line along the side of the ship's hull. Rogue had set up a bed roll against one of the supply sleds, next to 4120 as a sort of command post.

I paused, then looked back. Where was 4120?

I stood up and was cautiously reaching for my blaster when alarms abruptly sounded; piercing the night as they wailed from deep within the half-buried smuggling ship. Everyone awoke with a jolt.

The startled animals were immediately spooked, braying loudly and pulling hard against their restraints. One of them broke free of its tether and ran off into the blue-white sand of the dimly-lit dunes.

The Sandtrooper's Story

Rogue jumped up, looking down for 4120, who wasn't there. I was racing toward him now, "He's not there. I noticed he was missing just before the alarm went off."

The doc was pulling on his glasses and running toward us pointing to the side of the ship. "The hatch is open!"

Bem held a frightened Lina, and Miren covered her ears as EreK and Zu grabbed their blasters and ran with Daegan and Ash to our assembled group by the ship.

Rogue powered his blaster on. "Deck, you and Falker come with me. Tops, take 0600, Etz and the others and secure a perimeter around the ship."

"How can we help?" shouted Zu over the wailing.

Rogue turned back to her, yelling as we entered the hatch, "Take orders from 0600. Nobody gets in or out."

0600 quickly directed Zu to the front of the ship, sent Daegan and Ash toward the back and positioned EreK at the hatch opening. "You heard the man. No one in or out."

EreK stood at the opened hatch, blaster in hand watching the others disappear into the night. When they were gone, and he was certain we were far enough ahead, he turned and stepped through the opening.

The ship was listing quite far to one side and the rear was still quite buried in the sand. Once inside, we moved into the main corridor, walking half on the wall and half on the floor.

To our left was the cockpit, to the right was a main hallway leading down the backbone of the ship toward the rear cargo areas and engines. As we moved over a tangle of debris and hanging wires in the tilted hallway, Rogue activated three bright fusion glow rods, keeping one and passing the others to Falker and me. The screeching rise and fall of the alarm was utterly deafening. It went way beyond loud toward a distorted vibration of our eardrums that threatened to throw us off balance, and we were reduced to simple hand motions for communication.

Quickly we moved deeper into the ill-fated vessel looking for 4120 and whatever had triggered the alarm, passing several lateral gunners' stations. Rogue motioned to the second gun and the dried, skeletal remains of a dead crew member in a grey flight suit and headset that was slumped over its controls. The intense heat of the sand had long ago sucked all moisture from the ship, and the dead.

A third corpse lay sprawled across the floor and wall ahead, clutching a blaster. We pushed past the dead gunner and stepped over the other body as we moved still deeper inside.

The ear-splitting screech of the sirens steadily grew in intensity as we moved aft, passing through an open set of airlock doors with control panels illuminated by the fading emergency power. We continued on beyond them, working our way through a tangle of wires spilling from the

The Sandtrooper's Story

overhead panels, clearing a path until finally, we arrived at the twin cargo areas. Here, we could feel the alarm rattling our bones and flashing alarm strobes streamed out of both hatches; one was open, one closed. We opted to check the open one first.

Rogue stepped quickly through the open hatch as Falker and I covered him from the either side of the opening. Aside from flashing lights, there was no movement in this room at all. We both raised our blasters as Rogue retreated back into the hall, stepping closer to the hatch on the opposite side. Through the small transparisteel port in its center we could see strobing lights filtered through what looked like pink smoke.

Falker reached for the door control, but Rogue grabbed his arm. "Wait! I don't like the look of this, it could be a trap." We all looked closer, studying the window pane.

Suddenly, what was left of 4120's face slammed into the window, leaving a bloody smear in its wake. Each of us jumped, the hairs on our necks instantly standing on end as we backpedaled, stumbling back in absolute shock and terror. Rogue and Falker slammed into the bulkhead across the hall, I fell through the open hatch to the floor in the other cargo area.

"4120!" Rogue blurted out, horrified.

I quickly got back on my feet, as we all watched helplessly. One of our own was struggling and dying against the inside of the hatch panel and there was nothing we could do. Visible in the strobing pink light, his face was liquefying, the crimson droplets of blood and tissue floating away.

Rogue lunged for the control panel, "Get him out of there!"

Falker grabbed him, throwing him back against the bulkhead, staring him in the eyes. "It's too late! It's too late."

We watched in horror as he clawed at the glass. His mechanical hand finally separated from his stump, spinning away into the gas as what remained of his arm liquefied. Once it disappeared, there was no more movement from inside.

I abruptly leaned over and vomited on the hallway floor.

As I wiped my mouth, Erek appeared out of the darkness behind Rogue, pushing past him, reaching for the door controls. "Get him out of there! What are you waiting for?"

Falker and Rogue both tried to stop him, but it was too late; he had slipped past them and was already pressing the hatch release. As he did, time slowed to a crawl and things shifted into slow motion.

Falker's eyes went wide. He turned away from Erek, dropped his glow rod and grabbed Rogue and me by the arms, shoving us into the dark hallway ahead of him. "Run!"

The Sandtrooper's Story

The instant the hatch seal was broken, the pressurized gas inside blasted out into the hallway, throwing EreK back into the wall, knocking him down before rolling through the hallway after us.

We tore through the corridor toward the front of the ship, ripping through the web of tangled wiring until we passed through the threshold of the central airlock doors. Falker slammed his palm against the dim controls to close them. They lurched, and slowly began sliding across the hall, powered by the fading emergency batteries. The gas churned down the hall toward us, closer and closer.

“Come on! Close! Close!” yelled Falker, reaching out to grab the window pane in the door, urging it to slide closed faster. Stubbornly the door continued its slow closure. Under normal power situations, this door would have slammed shut instantly, sealing off the rear of the ship, protecting the forward compartments and the cockpit.

The hatch finally met the opposite side of the hall, locking and seating the seals just as the gas curled up against the other side.

Each of us had backed away from the door, breathing hard; bodies shaking from the sudden adrenaline rush.

“What the hell just happened?” Falker yelled, slamming a fist into the wall. “What the HELL just happened?”

There were grim looks all ‘round. 4120 was gone.

With the gas contained, Rogue took a step closer to the hatch, his mind reeling with what we’d just witnessed; 4120’s final grisly moments, and the horror of knowing what suffering lay in store for EreK.

As we did, the young archaeologist appeared on the other side of the airlock door, banging furiously on the inside of the transparisteel port trying to get out, his skin already bubbling and dissolving.

All we could do was look away; he had sealed his own fate.

We turned away somberly, trying to push the image of EreK’s frantic face far back in our minds as we headed for the airlock to the outside. We stepped through the hatch, out into the night air. As we did, we passed 0600, who had taken up EreK’s guard position by the hatch.

“Did you guys find anything in there? There’s still no sign of 4120, and EreK disappeared from his post here by the hatch. Nobody saw anyone or anything take him away from . . .”

“He’s inside. EreK’s inside. He and 4120 are both inside” Falker yelled, cutting him off grimly.

The Sandtrooper's Story

I jumped in to help Falker, who was suddenly unable to continue speaking. As I did, the screeching sirens from within the ship fell silent; the emergency power batteries finally dead. I, however, was already yelling to be heard over their wail. "They're dead. Gone. Erek and 4120 are both dead."

My screaming voice, intended for 0600 only, had filled up the sudden silence, blurring out their fate to everyone. The weight of my words instantly slamming home like a shot to the chest.

Doc and the rest of the diggers that had come running to hear what was happening froze when they heard the news.

0600 looked away for a microsecond, then turned back, questioning in disbelief. "Dead? How? What happened?"

Ash turned away, eyes closed in shocked acceptance.

Bem's mouth fell open.

Daegan shook his head incredulously. "He was right here; RIGHT HERE not five minutes ago" he said pointing to the ground outside the hatch. "What happened?"

'Lina and Miren were in shock, their bodies involuntarily shaking; hands held over their mouths.

Zu had an arm around doc, comforting the old man.

All eyes were on me, pleading with me to repeat what I'd spewed out and somehow make the words be different when spoken a second time.

I was about to reply when Rogue cut in. "4120 was inside the ship for reasons unknown, and fell victim to a smuggler's trap, a highly corrosive gas that seemed to act like Vergesso Nerve Compound. Erek tried to set him free. Deckard, Falker and I were forced to retreat to a set of airlock doors and seal off that part of the ship."

"And kill Erek in the process!" yelled Daegan.

Gravely, Rogue stared into the young man's face. "He was dead already. The instant he exposed himself, it was only a matter of time. We had to seal the airlock to protect ourselves and everyone in proximity to the ship, including you. It could have killed us all. I'm sorry, it was not an easy decision to be made, but it had to be made."

The black of the moonless sky above seemed to reach on for infinity. A slight wind blowing across the sand was the only sound now, except Miren's sobbing. 'Lina comforted her as everyone silently turned and walked away, heading back to their sleeping areas. Doc paused briefly to glance at Erek's bed roll before moving on to his own. The young band of research diggers leaned on each other, grieving together as a group.

The Sandtrooper's Story

The rest of our troops, still in their positions securing the perimeter, were called in by Rogue, and each told what had happened. As the heavy reality of loss crept in again, we too scattered; each of us dealing with it in our own way.

Rogue lay back on his bed roll, going over what had happened, replaying those terrible moments inside the ship over and over in a constant loop.

Falker walked off into the darkness beyond the fringes of our camp, into the small surrounding dunes.

I walked away in the opposite direction to get some air. We had all lost 4120 and Ereka, but Falker, Rogue and I carried some pretty vivid images to process. I knew eventually we would push them to the back of things and bury them deep, but they would haunt each of us for some time to come.

We all re-evaluated our involvement in this quest. The troopers of the 104th MFP existed outside the official capacity of the Empire now, Rogue's holocron orders told us that when we arrived here. Did we really need to be searching for this recording? Was it worth the price we had paid already?

The darkness of that endless night somehow managed to slip painfully by, but even the idea of sleep was elusive to all.

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