

## Chapter 3 - Arrival

In another system, far from our cruising shuttle, a small, covert task force took their positions around the perimeter security fence of an Imperial Holonet communications tower on Toprawa. One of them leaned in close to the woman leading the group and whispered, "Bria, this has to work, or there's no future for the Rebellion. There's no room for error or failure here."

She stared back at him, full of resolve, "It'll work. It has to. We've come too far and lost too many of the Red Hand already for it not to."

As she carefully studied the base of the tower and the Stormtrooper guards, her thoughts drifted back to the friends that had fallen along the way. When the data had been recovered from the attacked Imperial convoy and smuggled to Darknell, many had died to get it that far.

She remembered the long hours in the still darkness hiding in the caverns of the nearby moon, swallowing the grief and tears for her friends as they waited, hoping the search teams would pass without discovering them. Finally, the time was right to slip by unnoticed and make their way here, to Toprawa.

"The Holonet communication center here is our best chance of getting these plans into the hands of someone that can actually do something with them." She glanced skyward, following the lines of the enormous communication tower that stretched up into the clouds.

"You sure they'll be here? This is a restricted system. No one is going to be allowed to just orbit above the planet."

She glanced over to him and then back to her work, exposing the inner wires of the power cable running in the dirt beneath her feet, "They'll be here. The Tantive IV has diplomatic immunity, although this opens a new era in the fight against the Empire. Alderaan has chosen a side. Thankfully it's ours. Our troops on Raltiiir created enough of a diversion to get word to a member of the Royal house while they were there to deliver medical supplies to the high council. They were given the coordinates, timing and their codename. They'll be here."

She silently motioned to the team on the far side of the tower and they simultaneously cut the power system for the perimeter shields. The low-pitched tone of the defense shields evaporated, as did the protection they afforded.

The two relaxed stormtrooper guards conversing at the tower entrance immediately went into a defensive stance as the third guard stepped inside the tower's base to check the reason for the system failure. Bria's readings showed the shields were down.

She gave the signal, and her team rose up from their cover and stormed the entrance, blasters blazing. The guards were outgunned, and fell in the blinding flurry of blaster fire.

Bria and her faction boarded the turbo lift bound for the transmission control room at the top of the tower. Only tense focused breathing could be heard as the small group silently closed in on

the top of the massive structure. All were here risking their lives to regain what had been taken from them, and the whole of the Republic. Each one of them sensed the importance of this mission. They could feel that change was near, that a new hope was coming, and that their actions would be told in stories for generations to come as the turning of the tide against the Empire.

The lift came to a stop and the durasteel doors slid open. A crouching Bria fired a single shot through the chest of the officer in charge. Then, only the sounds of the machines cut the silence of the empty command center. They rushed out of the lift, through the drifting smoke and smell of burnt flesh, spreading their gear out on a console. Bria reached inside her vest and withdrew a slender, armored metallic box and opened it. Inside was a transparent data card embedded with the information that could end the reign of the Empire, allowing a rebuilding of their once-noble society.

She delicately lifted the card out, loaded it into the transmission data port and dialed in a transmission channel. She turned to her team, "Our contact's codename is *Skyhook*. Let's do this."

The young rebel by her side pulled on the headset and slipped into the seat in front of the communication console. He keyed in the frequency code, pleading into the headset, "Come in Skyhook, Come in Skyhook!"

Far below, a squad of Stormtroopers raced out of the forest toward the base of the tower.

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It had been a long flight with many stops; dropping off supplies, changing ships, picking up a trooper here and there. One by one they had settled in, dropped their gear, worn in most cases, in a pile by their side, pulled off their buckets and strapped in for the flight. From the looks of their armor, they had all been in service to the Empire for some time, as I had, and knew the drill: take a seat, rest your body, rest your mind as long as you could.

The sub-light engines' gentle whine under their stress, and the slight jostling of the solar winds rocking us back and forth in the dim light of the cargo hold was the perfect catalyst for drifting in and out of sleep. Sleep. Troopers learned early on in their training that when you had the chance, you grabbed it, not knowing when you might see it uninterrupted again, for a long time.

The troopers from Kessel apparently knew Taka from a past station assignment. Although their initial greetings had been friendly, there had been a fair amount of tension during the flight, and the situation appeared to have been awkward for all three. They had spent a short time talking in the rear of the ship and then drifted off to sleep like the rest of us. My chest armor was pressed tight against my webbed harness as I leaned forward into it, my head hung heavily forward. I was drifting in and out of consciousness when through the murkiness of my dreamstate I heard equipment crates creaking and rattling, and then, disembodied voices talking about an incident

with a suspected rebel craft. There was someone on an intercom and a live voice within our ship. It was Lt. Tank asking if it was safe to proceed on his current plotted course.

My eyes opened slightly. I was staring at my feet on the metal deck plate. I lifted my head a bit and saw everyone else hanging similarly.

The voice on the comm cracked back, "This is the Star Destroyer *Devastator*. We have tracked a vessel receiving beamed communications from a suspected rebel source in a restricted solar system. They were using the guise of engine repair to cover their presence in the restricted zone. We hailed the ship and commanded her captain to heave to for boarding. Our order was ignored, and the Corellian Corvette attempted to flee, disappearing into a hyperspace jump. What the captain failed to realize was that we had an embedded spy onboard. They transmitted the jump coordinates back to us and we surprised them by reverting back to normal space just behind their new position. We gave chase, firing on the small vessel as it again tried to run and jump away. We easily overtook it once the main solar fin had been destroyed and the reactor damaged. We've just pulled it in with our tractor beam and are attaching moorings now. As for you, your current course plot is clear."

Our pilot spoke back, "*Devastator*, I am hauling troops for deployment and have need of supplies. Our last stop did not have the equipment they will need to activate their new outpost. Request permission to dock and take on what we need."

The comm crackled in silence a moment, then the *Devastator* replied: "Sorry for the delay, I have some rookies in here watching the boarding party on our monitors as a training exercise. Permission granted to dock. Proceed with caution. The Corellian ship is in our bay now. Troops are boarding it as we speak and we are taking fire from the occupants. Follow protocol, and maneuver into sub-bay 3."

I was fully awake now. I raised my head and looked around. Everyone else was still asleep. I leaned forward and to the side, straining my neck to look out the gunner's viewport and saw the brilliant tan curvature of a planet beneath us, and the *Devastator* just ahead.

As we drew closer, the pilot slowed the drive system and engaged the landing gear. A rumbling, mechanical vibration began rattling the long row of jumpseats as the lower wings of the shuttle gracefully folded into their upward-reaching position for landing. The other troops stirred and lifted their heads, and the vast sea of stars disappeared from the gunner's port as we flew under the enormous Destroyer.

I saw the rim of the yawning hangar bay, and we smoothly began to ascend inside when I saw it; a really beautiful Corellian ship under high-tension energy restraints. A retractable boarding tunnel had been positioned under the bay doors in its belly. The *Devastator's* troops had most likely used heavy-duty vibrocutters to cut their way inside to the bay, and would then have blown the inner door for entry.

As I watched, I saw several bright explosive flashes from the side of the ship, as four escape pods were jettisoned in a shower of tiny metallic fragments from the midsection. Our shuttle shook violently, as the hurtling pods narrowly missed us.

Occasionally when a vessel was boarded, wiring damage sustained from interior firefighting caused the escape pods to randomly eject. I watched as the destroyer's guns trained and locked on the falling pods. Two were destroyed almost immediately. The other two were allowed to fall away toward the planet below.

The gunners had most likely scanned them and found no lifeforms onboard. I settled back in my seat as our craft slid silently up and into the third recessed sub-bay on the back wall of the main hangar. Waking up slowly was a luxury I drank in whenever the opportunity presented itself. Usually I was awakened by an explosion, sudden blaster fire or screaming proximity alarms.

I felt the landing gear gently bump the deck, then give and settle under the weight of our ship. There was some chatter in the back.

The troopers we had picked up on Kessel were talking with Topolev and Danz about their training on Carida. My time at the Imperial Training Facility on Carida seemed like an eternity ago; another place, another time; another me. As our shuttle settled to the deck, a loud noise filled the cargo area where we were, and the rear hatch airlock seals released followed by the ramp slowly lowering to the bay floor outside. The pilot walked down from the cockpit, past us without a word and down into the bay.

4120, Ddraig, Falker and several of the others were already out of their harnesses and following him onto the Destroyer, stretching. I looked down and released the clasped five-point buckle at the center of my chest and stood. We were en route to our post, so we were not required to wear our helmets. Leaving it behind, I sauntered down the plank into the hangar. Steam belched from release valves near the extended gear.

As I stepped off the ramp, I adjusted my neckseal and drew in a lungful of air. It was heavy with the smell and faint taste of deodorizers and disinfectants from the onboard atmospheric scrubbers. The air in these huge Destroyers was rarely changed out, it was simply purified and recycled.

Our pilot was in a small room behind a plate of transparisteel talking to a uniformed flight crew technician, most likely the voice on the comm. Several troopers stood behind them watching some action on a large display. It was being broadcast from inside the captured Corvette from a tiny camera in one of the Troopers' buckets.

The turbolift doors opened, and a black-uniformed officer had a silver protocol 'droid by the arm, briskly escorting it toward the security blast doors on the opposite side of the hangar bay. He was de-briefing the 'droid as they walked, and I could hear a bit of what they were saying as they passed me. "Yes, that's right, and the special programming you were given worked perfectly, U-3PO. You will no longer be serving aboard the *Tantive*, you will have a memory flush and be reassigned to . . ." and they disappeared into the corridor on the far side, blast doors closing

behind them.

4120, the crew from *Denon Station* and the Kessel guys were looking at the Sentinel ship beside us. Topolev was telling them some of its specs, as he had been deployed on one during the tail-end of the conflict on Kashyyyk. I walked over and placed my hand on the transparisteel panel, and leaned in close, blocking the reflected glare of the bay, trying to get a better look. I could hear nothing, but the screen showed a handful of troopers walking down a dimly lit gantry. Suddenly a figure in white stepped out from behind part of the hyperdrive engine and fired a point-blank shot at the camera.

The screen went blank with static, then another cam snapped on, this one on a helmet further back in the group. The fallen trooper was at the bottom of the frame, his head smoking. The girl was darting away as a series of expanding, blue stun rings was flung out from another trooper's lowered blaster, hurtling toward the fleeing girl.

The first ring tapped her on the back and knocked her to the deck, unconscious, as the other rings washed over her.

Foolish girl. It was useless to resist.

Shaking my head, and backing away from the window, I turned and walked to the edge of the sub-bay and peered down into the cavernous, echoing main bay. The planet I had seen on our approach lay far beneath us; a bright, massive planet slipping by against the darkness of the stars beyond.

Far above all of this, in the *Devastator's* bay, the captured Corvette's back was scored and streaked; sparking flames and smoke rising from where the solar fin must have been. Suddenly, another of the ship's escape pods, from the stern cluster, ejected in a flash of light and a spewing of shrapnel. I watched again as the destroyer's guns trained and locked on the falling pod, preparing to destroy it, and then, nothing. The blast never came. The tiny pod tumbled and rolled toward the massive planet beneath us.

The Corellians certainly did know how to make a fine ship. It was a very bold design. Her lines were sleek, with a broad stroke of red down the sides and a large cluster of engines in the rear. On her side, just behind the command deck was a crest of some kind. I reached for my belt, and unclipped my macrobinoculars as I squinted and tried in vain to make it out.

The blue electro-image flickered to life with a buzz as I raised the macros to my eyes. I adjusted the zoom, reaching out across the hangar, until the image was clear; the royal house of Alderaan. Lowering the macros, I thought to myself, "Could that be right?" I had no idea where we were, but I knew it wasn't anywhere near Alderaan.

I glanced back toward the shuttle as I snapped off the macros and reattached them to my belt. I turned to walk back to the monitors and watch more of the boarding party when a protocol droid stepped in front of me offering a drink. I took it, and watched the mech hand a drink to Falker and then walk off in search of the others in my group. It was one of the passions of my youth,

droid mechanics and maintenance, but I swear if this one had not spoken I would have run right into it. Droids always seemed of no consequence, blended into the background like a food processing or weather-sensing unit until they were malfunctioning. That's usually when I got involved if there were no maintenance techs around. I rubbed my eyes with my gloved hand and took a sip of the cool drink as I walked back toward the comm station.

I barely noticed several droid load-lifters as they adjusted the settings on a repulsor-lift sled. In my peripheral vision I saw it rise about 3 feet off the ground, floating with our new bundled supplies on top. With a firm push from their servo-mechanical arms, the supplies slid silently up the rear ramp of the shuttle into the cargo hold, with the droids walking behind. I took a deeper swallow of my drink as I walked. I was more focused on the troops in the comm station and the training feed they were watching.

The monitor revealed that Lord Vader was now aboard the Corellian ship. He was in the main corridor questioning the captured girl in white.

Princess Leia Organa, member of the Royal house of Alderaan, and an Imperial Senator now stood before him in the hallway. Although I was a trooper in groups that had been deployed in many remote regions, most of us had heard of the young, beautiful princess from Alderaan. In a sea of crusty old Senators, she definitely stood out. Vader was ruthless and relentless in his pursuit when he wanted something, and he believed she was hiding something from him. I found it hard to believe that this young, powerful Senator was the recipient and custodian of stolen Imperial documents or plans beamed onboard by rebel spies, but she seemed to be holding her own as the dark Lord questioned her.

A dozen or so troopers filed into the bay from within the bowels of this massive destroyer and fell into formation just behind the Sentinel.

Several of the others in my party were sitting on the edge of the cargo ramp talking to one of the troopers from the *Devastator* that had filed out with the others and walked over to our ship. He had a bag full of gear. It appeared we were picking up another new passenger. His armor gleamed in the bright lights of this sub-bay, a sharp contrast to the other troopers whose armor had not seen clean in a very long time.

The doors to the turbolift opened, and a well-worn, veteran Sandtrooper walked out with a gearbag slung over one shoulder and carrying a heavy rifle. He stopped a deckhand and they spoke for a moment. The deckhand looked around to the drop ship and then over to our shuttle and pointed toward us. Nodding, the trooper turned and began walking our way.

The load-lifter droids marched out of the shuttle after securing our supplies inside. Tank had pulled Rogue aside and was speaking privately with him. He handed the invoice for our new supplies to him, then he turned and crossed the bay toward us, "OK, everybody on board, we're getting out of here." He briskly walked past us and up the ramp. The clean trooper eagerly gathered his gear and followed him into the ship. Rookie.

We all reluctantly complied, slowly making our way back inside the shuttle. As the trooper from the lift walked past me I said hello, “Hey, I’m Deckard, TD-2187, this is 4120.”

He shook our hands, “I’m Ardan Drone, TD-0582, but call me Blade.” As he spoke, he looked past us and up to a gantry that ran high above near the hanger ceiling. I looked up to see what he was staring at. A dark figure stood there, raised one hand then turned and walked away. Blade turned and walked up the ramp shaking his head.

I wondered what his story was. Maybe I would find out, maybe not. I took a last look back at the monitor. The young princess was being escorted off of the Corvette by a detachment of troopers. Lord Vader would most likely have a false distress signal sent out from the ship, as if they were in trouble.

It would make it all the more convincing when he informed the Senate that everyone on board was killed. The beautiful princess would most likely never see the light of day again, and everyone would think she had met her untimely end in a tragic accident.

I found it funny how fate had a way of bringing people to their destiny. Turning away, I stepped onto the ramp as it began to lift into the stowed position. I walked its’ length and found my way through the other troopers back to my metal jumpseat.

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Somewhere, high above the surface of the planet beneath the *Devastator*, high above this unimportant desert planet, this . . . Tatooine, a tiny, Corellian-made escape pod streaked across the dark skies heading for a giant expanse of emptiness known as the Dune Sea. As impact drew near, the ejected, tumbling, empty pod suddenly fired its’ steering and braking thrusters . . .

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The new guys were just settling in and the engines were coming up as I sat and clasped the harness across my chest; another glorious day in service to the Empire. The clean trooper shouted out to the group over the engine noise, “I’m Etz, Engedi Etz, TK-1255.”

Everyone nodded in his direction as we were all thrown back and forth while the ship lifted off from the deck and turned to exit sub-bay 3. We glided over the edge and down into the main bay. The front of the Corvette slid silently past and we slipped through the magnetic airlock membrane, exiting the hangar bay.

Then suddenly we dove hard and steep, thrusting away from the Destroyer and falling like a stone toward the surface of the expansive, tan planet beneath us. "Damn it Tank!" He just laughed back from the cockpit. He had a long way to go to approach Riggs' skills, but he was good, and having a bit of fun at the expense of our stomachs!

These pilots were almost always frustrated TIE pilot wannabes or fighter school rejects and loved to perform twisting dives on planetary approach. I wished I had not had the drink, as I felt

it rising in my throat. He rolled the shuttle over several times. We covered our heads as our gearbags and Impervium helmets tumbled through the air like missiles. Thankfully, our rifles were clipped in. The rolling stopped and proximity claxons blared through the ship as the ground rose up to meet us far too fast. We blasted into one of the deep canyons etched on the planet's surface, pulling up at the last possible instant, screaming along at full speed.

The ship was rattling wildly, and I leaned forward to look out the gunner's port again, my heart beating wildly, adrenaline coursing through me. Straining against my harness, I saw the walls of the canyon flying by on both sides. 4120 pointed out the port and yelled, "ROCK!" A huge rock formation loomed in the center of the canyon, and we were coming up on it fast . . . too fast!

It was tall, with a slotted opening in the center, far too small for our speeding craft to pass through, and definitely too wide to pass on either side! At the last possible moment, the pilot broke hard right down a side canyon just before our headlong impact. He followed it for some time before he pulled up above the canyon rim.

Then his voice blared over the bulkhead-mounted speakers, "This is Lieutenant Tank, and that, gentlemen, is known to the locals as *the Stone Needle*. Too bad we're a little too big to try threading it today. I've seen it done, but never tried it myself."

The crosswinds buffeted the shuttle as we rose beyond the protective stone walls into a sandstorm that was raging on the shifting dunes.

The roar in the cargo bay from the waves of howling sand blasting the hull was deafening. As we ascended, and finally cleared the edge of the storm, the roaring sound subsided and we could now see a small city in the distance, with ships coming and going.

As our approach brought us nearer, we saw many cluttered streets, domed buildings, smoke, then the spaceport, and row after row of tiny underground docking bay pits spreading out in a semi-circular fan.

We slowly flew over several open bay pits as one was sought out for us.

Once the bay assignment was confirmed by the spaceport authority, Lt. Tank lowered the landing gear and folded the wings upward once again, giving us and our equipment a last shake and rattle as the powerful wing mechanisms lumbered beneath our seats.

He yelled down to us from the cockpit as the ship banked and then descended into our assigned bay's opening, "This is the end of the line everybody . . . **Mos Eisley Spaceport, Tatooine.**" The ship gently touched down, "Everybody up and out. I have your orders."

We exchanged glances, all realizing at once that those we thought were casual, passing acquaintances with troopers we had swapped stories with were going to become the core members of a new unit. None of us had any idea we were all being assigned to the same destination until this moment.

I looked around at the other troopers that had been brought on since Anoat: Topolev, 4120, Danz, Ddraig, 1265, Falker, Taka, Rogue, 0600, Blade and the other new guy, Etz. We were being thrown together on the backside of nowhere on the outer fringes of the Outer Rim territory. I shook my head. We must have all done something really terrible in a previous life.

As the front ramp lowered from beneath the sloped nose of the cockpit of the Lambda-class shuttle, a blast of hot, dry air washed over us and bright sunlight streamed in. Tank handed Rogue a data card containing our orders, and then disappeared down the ramp, pulling off his gloves, "There are environmental packs here for anyone that doesn't have one", gesturing to one of the large crates, "I'm going to get a drink." We grabbed our buckets and gear and made our way down the ramp. Some of the troops stopped to grab a pack as we disembarked. Stepping off the metallic plank onto the stone floor of the small bay here was quite a contrast to the gleaming Imperial bay we had been in just minutes before so far above.

The walls were worn and dirty. We all stopped briefly, glancing around and then up. Sand had blown in from the opening overhead and drifted across the floor, collecting in small dunes around the grungy, worn out fueling lines in the corner. No magnetic shields here.

As I looked around I realized he wasn't kidding when he said this was the end of the line.

Sand.

Many of us had worked in these conditions before, but the new guys, Taka and Etz, appeared to have come from starship posts. The whine of the engines was winding down into silence now, and I could feel my environmental body glove begin to cool slightly in waves across my skin, adjusting to the heat. I shouldered my pack, and propped my rifle against the ramp as Rogue activated the holo message embedded in the card and the others gathered around to see what was in store for us.

A small bluish-purple hologram of an officer sprang forth in the palm of his hand and began relaying the terms of the assignment. The holographic officer explained that we were to establish a new unit, the *104th Moisture Farm Patrol*, to protect and manage the local farmers of the region, moisture farmers.

*"Tatooine is a desert as far as the eye can see, barren and unforgiving. Water is a rare and valuable resource here. Among the local inhabitants are the moisture farmers. These farmers use evaporative moisture condensers or 'vaporators' to pull precious drinking water from the air, as natural precipitation does not occur. The moisture farms are large and widespread, skirting the established towns. There are small pockets of indigenous creatures here and there, scavengers and desert nomads for the most part. The small, crowded cities are generally populated by lowlife spacers; smugglers, gamblers and bounty hunters who have a great desire not to be noticed or found."*

As I looked around at the stained stone walls, I could not think of a better place for that than where I was now standing.

*“TD-1009 has been appointed the Commanding Officer, with TD-4120 as his second in command. You are to establish your unit and enforce Imperial law. While this planet is in the furthest reaches of the Outer Rim territory, and does not have any significance to speak of, it is considered Hutt-controlled and smugglers use it as a refuge and a base of operations. Their services are utilized from time to time to complete official Imperial business in situations where troops would attract far too much attention. It is in our best interest to maintain a presence here. Your involvement on Tatooine must fall outside the jurisdiction of the 501st and that of the Empire as well. The Empire cannot have any official ties to the underworld. While you will remain Imperial troops, you will not officially exist.*

*There are quarters for your group near the spaceport. TD-1009’s helmet feed will display the information necessary to locate it. There is a local cantina nearby frequented by pilots of all types that is considered a bit of a hot spot. Your patrolling presence will help control this establishment as well.”*

With that, the flickering image retracted into the small wafer-sized card. Rogue slid it into his belt pouch and said, “Lt. Tank informed me that our shuttle was going to be followed down by a Sentinel-class troop drop ship. Those troops will be working both alone and with us on our first mission here. Apparently the ship the **Devastator** captured ejected several escape pods during the fighting. Most were destroyed by their gunners. Several made it through. Onboard one of those pods is sensitive Imperial Intelligence of interest to Lord Vader. One pod was never pulled into the planetary gravity well, and was recovered in orbit, above, but no information was found onboard. Three made it all the way down here. Our job is to help recover that intelligence if it made it to the surface. OK men, let’s get going and find this bloody post we’ve been assigned to, it looks like we are going to be here awhile.”

There was the slight evidence of an accent of some sort. I had heard it before, but couldn’t quite place where; somewhere at one of the many posts over the years. Everyone grabbed up their gear and an environmental pack if they didn’t have one and fell into a line behind him. They ended up with several different styles of packs. I guess Tatooine didn’t warrant the new stuff.

0600, who had a lip full of Mandalorian sweet grass, lifted the lower edge of his bucket and spit. “Welcome to the ass-end of space gentlemen.”

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