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## TATOOINE

A few hours outside of Utapau, the royal starship rocketed through the shimmering currents of the hyperspace lane that would carry it all the way to Tatooine for safe refuge. The ship left conventional existence as soon as it made the jump into hyperspace, accelerating so quickly that it rendered the conventional notions of velocity irrelevant. The entire universe compacted into one blue-shaded and high-speed blur of a tunnel, cutting off the entire craft from any normal method of scanning and detection. This proved helpful, considering the Federation was undoubtedly scouring the galaxy for them.

Inside, the passengers and crew couldn't help but be thankful. It was only through the skill and luck of one little R2 droid did they manage to escape from being blasted into nothingness by the scourge of the battleship guns in orbit of their home. Most of them had been hesitant about getting on the ship in the first place, but they trusted their queen's judgment when she decided to leave. They thought it was a mistake as soon as the craft reached the blockade, but the R2 unit heroically and thankfully proved them wrong.

Panaka, having left his men in crew quarters so they could rest up for their time on Tatooine, still didn't trust the judgment and experience of anyone but himself, particularly the Jedi. He was a well trained and reasonably level-headed man who was educated off of his home world of Utapau. Panaka served for many years as a member of the Republic Judicial Forces, the small military force the Republic had to offer, where he gained combat experience against pirate raiders. The experiences proved beneficial when he went home and joined the Utapau Security Forces, using them to eventually climb the ranks to where he was now. It had been an honor to serve both the queen and her father, but he favored the queen much more than her controversial predecessor.

Now, he stood before his queen once again, alongside the two Jedi and the small astromech droid that had saved their lives. Utapau didn't utilize droids to a large degree, preferring manual labor to machine labor, so he didn't realize until only a few hours earlier how truly valuable a droid could be. The fact that they weren't dead was a testament to the abilities and usefulness of the small blue and white droid beside him.

"It's an extremely well put together little droid," Panaka told the queen, breaking his generally stoic and monotonic voice to offer an expression of gratitude to the droid. "Without a doubt, it saved the ship and our lives."

"It's to be commended," Arcadia ordered. "What is its number?"

"It says," Panaka said as he leaned down to see the number on the back while the droid let out a small whistle, almost embarrassed over so many people fawning over the relatively simple task of repairing the ship, "R2-D2, your Highness."

"Thank you, R2-D2," the queen said with a smile before turning to face the two Jedi who were standing in the corner, as she knew that they too wished to speak.

"Your Majesty," Obi-Wan began, "we've set a course for a remote desert planet called Tatooine. It's a system outside the influence of the Trade Federation. We will be able to make repairs and then travel to Coruscant."

However reasonable Panaka may have been, he simply couldn't agree with Obi-Wan's assessment. Panaka knew from experience that the Hutts were extremely dangerous and would love nothing more to have a ruling monarch as one of their prized slave girls. The captain had come into contact with them enough times to realize this, considering many of the pirates he encountered during his time in the Judicial Forces worked for the Hutts. The Jedi's idea was foolish, to say the least, and Panaka could only hope the queen would trust in his judgment.

"I can't agree with the Jedi on this," Panaka said boldly, a direct challenge to the much-touted wisdom of the Jedi Order. "Tatooine is a violent world ruled by the Hutt gangsters. I know you're well aware of them, so you must know how risky this is."

"You must trust my judgment, Majesty," Obi-Wan said, trying to reflect a sense of wisdom and profound experience into his voice. He wasn't about to use the Force to manipulate the queen into agreeing with him. He felt he could get her to agree with its aid.

Arcadia leaned back on her makeshift throne to think over whether or not it was an acceptable risk. On one hand, the Hutts were a dangerously violent people and she could be in grave danger if they discovered her. On the other hand, though, she had to get as far away from the Trade Federation as possible. Making her way to a Republic world with a Federation presence was far more dangerous. There was only one clear option.

"Alert me once we reach Tatooine," Arcadia commanded, acknowledging her decision to follow the course that the Jedi had already set.

Captain's Panaka's head dropped. He let out a deep sigh as his shoulders sagged, distraught that the queen would choose an action he found so blatantly stupid. The best he would be able to do was protect her at that point, but if there was danger from the Hutts, or anyone else, then he couldn't imagine his dozen or so security officers standing much of a chance.

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Tatooine. It was the planet of limitless sand, or so many travelers had said. The desert rock was said to have been one of the oldest planets in known space. Because it orbited two stars, it was completely covered in deserts and rock formations. The planet was so brightly lit that, to those from a distance in space, it would appear to be a third star when looked at from the right angle. Tatooine was initially discovered this way. Explorers believed that they had found a trinity of stars in one system, only to be amazed when they found a planet.

Very little of Tatooine was habitable to Humans outside the northernmost quarters of the surface. One could only stay in the other regions for so long before succumbing to violent temperatures and harsh sandstorms. Only one percent of the planet was covered in surface water, but fossil records showed that it did once have large oceans that eventually dried up. Numerous geological features were uncovered because of this, and the famed Dune Sea became a wasteland that, to a degree, was still somewhat habitable.

Dozens of sentient species called Tatooine their home, but they were all immigrants from other systems. Most of the non-Humans tended to spend their time in cantinas where they could gamble in drink, two of the few things anyone could do on the surface. The majority of the gambling was on swoop racing, one of the most dangerous sports in the entire galaxy let alone Tatooine. Most of these species were also employed by the vile Hutt Cartel.

In the cockpit of the queen's ship, nearly a day after the queen had given her blessing to continue on course, Panaka still dreaded their inevitable arrival. It would only be a few minutes until they arrived, but he was still having a minor internal panic attack. He had no idea what they were going to face on the surface, and he wasn't looking forward to finding out. Tatooine wasn't the friendliest of worlds, after all.

Gazing out the transparisteel window in front of him, Ric Olié watched as the planet grew larger and larger as they approached. Dooku and Panaka both stood behind him, looking over his shoulder at the ground map he Olié had brought up on his console's monitor. There weren't many large settlements where they would be able to make repairs, but that wasn't much of an issue. They had decided hours earlier that they didn't want to attract attention, so they would try one of the smaller towns in the habitable region.

"Land a few kilometers outside of this settlement," Dooku ordered as he leaned over the pilot's chair and pointed towards the location on the monitor. "Anchorhead."

Olié nodded and rapidly punched in the coordinates for the landing. It didn't take him long to realize, though, that the short range navigational sensors had been knocked offline. Switching to manual, an additional control panel slid out from beneath the main console, and from within it emerged a control stick. Olié grabbed hold of it and began their descent, angling the vessel in just the right position so it would enter the atmosphere without bouncing off or burning up.

Even with the slight risk, the seasoned pilot was able to guide the ship through the atmosphere with relative ease, at which point he turned his attention to the map still displaying beside him. The navigation sensors may have been down, but he had a fairly good idea of where he had descended to so he could successfully guide the ship to Anchorhead without too much trouble.

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Down on the surface of the Outer Rim world, the binary suns scorched down upon the wasteland with a ferocious intensity. The day was hot and laborious to travel through, and even the locations who were used to the extreme heat felt exhausted despite it being only 15:00 standard hours. The suns themselves bored into the skin of those who dared to enter into its malicious rays, not caring for the silent torment that came with it. Even so, very few ventured out into the midday suns on such a day unless they had to. Needless to say, not many people found a reason to make themselves go outside.

One such person was Annikin Skywalker, a young nineteen year old man sitting at a booth

in the back of the local Anchorhead Cantina. Annikin had a relatively muscular build, mostly from working with heavy moisture farm equipment for most of his life. With short hair, combed and flipped up in the front, he stood at nearly two meters in height. Annikin was respected in Anchorhead for being a man of character, but he tended to avoid interacting with people unless he knew them well or felt they needed help. He much preferred keeping to himself, probably a result of spending so much time working on the moisture vaporators on his family's moisture farm a few kilometers from Anchorhead.

Annikin took a sip of his water, savoring the refreshingly cool feeling as it slid down his throat. Some might have found it barbaric, but water was a treasure on Tatooine. There wasn't a single rain storm in the habitable area for nearly twenty years, and no one knew why. All they knew was that moisture farming was becoming harder and harder. Many farmers were already forced to use what money they had to move off world, lest they die of thirst and starvation in the scorching heat. Annikin himself intended to leave as soon as he could, having had enough of the giant ball of sand.

Turning to the window, Annikin looked out into the settlement. It was one of the oldest on the planet, having stood for over four thousand years. It was originally a mining facility used for organizations like Czerka Corporation, and it was abandoned and resettled numerous because of the ore's poor quality. Czerka abandoned it because of the hostility from the Tusken Raiders, and the low quality ore, nearly collapsing the settlement.

Despite the hard times, the people were able to make it a successful center for moisture farms, but it began to decline again because of the drought. But even the rainfall couldn't have changed the fact that the Hutts wrapped their greedy fat hands around it, placing Jabba the Hutt in control of nearly the entire planet. The disgustingly obese slug built a fortress right in the center of the town. People couldn't walk anywhere without being reminded that Jabba essentially owned their lives. It was disgusting, and Annikin knew it was the closest thing to being a slave without actually having chains around his ankles.

The young farmer had heard many stories about the settlement's glory days. One of them was from a Republic pilot that he and his friends met at a cantina when they were children. The pilot told them an ancient legend about a powerful Jedi Knight named Revan who landed in Anchorhead during the Jedi Civil War. He found a hidden star map that supposedly told him the location of an ancient super-weapon. Annikin knew that there was once a Jedi named Revan, but he didn't know what to make of the story itself. If it was true, then he wouldn't have seen that coming. He always saw Tatooine as insignificant on a galactic scale and couldn't fathom the idea that it held such great importance to the Jedi Knights.

Annikin tilted the glass back and took the final sip of water, slamming it back down on the table as he licked the few drops of water that were still on his lips. He shouldn't have spent his little personal money on something he easily could have had at home, but he couldn't have continued on with his day without a glass of water. He had experienced the devils of dehydration before, and it wasn't something he intended to live through again.

He was nearly to the door when he noticed the Rodian barkeeper behind the counter turn and pierce him with a look of disgust from his bulbous black eyes. The green-skinned Rodian was strange looking to Humans, just as every member of the reptilian-like species was. The Rodian had a distinctive face with multifaceted eyes, ears resembling a horned instrument and a flexible snout. A ridge of flexible spikes was visible on their skull, most different in volume. It was an odd appearance to many non-Rodians, but most assumed that Rodians felt the same about Humans.

"Wanta dah mole-rah?" The Rodian asked in Huttese, the language of the Hutts and numerous other sentient species in the Outer Rim Territories.

"You know how it is, Greedo," Annikin said, becoming visibly annoyed at the Rodian's question and insensitivity, despite the fact that he did owe Greedo money from lost swoop racing bets. "We all barely have money to make ends meet. I'm thinking about getting back into racing soon, so I'll pay you when I can."

"Keel-ee calleya ku kah," Greedo grumbled, disappointed in Annikin's continued refusal to pay up. "Tah pee-chah ah kulkee flunka. Tah-koh tee womp rat e'nachu!"

"I'm gonna end up as womp rat food?" Annikin laughed at the absurd insinuation. "You obviously haven't seen my race if you think I need to go back to racing school."

"Koochoo!" Greedo shouted in an incredibly insulting tone.

Annikin nearly jumped over the counter, ready to direct his anger through his fist and into the Rodian's teeth. Normally, Annikin wouldn't have let someone call him an idiot and let them get away with it without at least a verbal retort, but the heat from even inside the building was taking its toll on him. He had no desire to get into a fight with Greedo, even though it wouldn't have been the first time. Annikin always assumed that Greedo would one day come to a bad end, so the fight didn't matter much. He never would have wished death on anyone, but Annikin wouldn't shed any tears once some disgruntled person decided to shoot the Rodian.

"Stay out've trouble, Greedo," Annikin said as he left the cantina.

He didn't stay long enough to see anymore of Greedo's reactions, seen as how they were always more insults at protests at the lack of payment. Annikin didn't care much about the debt, as he knew he could handle the Rodian if he lost his temper. The bet had nothing to do with the Hutts, so there was no one to enforce it or even care about the fact that it was made. It was solely between the two of them.

Still, he couldn't help but feel bad that he owed someone something. Annikin tried to be as honest as possible and wanted to keep his promises, but the hard times on Tatooine left him devoid of any real amounts of money. The most he received was enough to buy parts in the shops for the farm, and maybe a glass of water or alcohol every so often. It wasn't an easy life on Tatooine, so he had to make do with what he had. Unfortunately for Greedo, that meant not paying owed debts.

Annikin kicked a couple of pebbles across the street, but became distracted when he heard a rumbling in the distance. Looking up, he saw a massive yellow block of sand coming towards the settlement from kilometers away. He hadn't heard about a sandstorm, something that was usually the case as they were incredibly difficult to foresee. They were far too common for his liking, especially since the drought rendered the land even more dry than normal, so there was always constant damage in the surrounding areas.

It was strange, though, how large this one was. It was one of the largest he had seen in recent years, which was certainly a cause for concern. All he could hope was that his family was safe on the farm. Annikin would end up staying in the basement of a building in Anchorhead, which was the smartest move he could make at that point. Trying to travel three kilometers back home was far too dangerous in such inhospitable weather.

Hearing a roar from above, Annikin's neck jolted upwards just in time to see a large silver space ship fly over the settlement, heading directly towards the storm. His eyes widened as he realized what was happening. The ship wouldn't have time to turn because of its speed, and if it hit head on then there was virtually no chance of anyone onboard surviving. The sandstorm would devour the vessel whole, leaving only bits and pieces of the twisted metal and shattered bodies in its wake.

Annikin ran to the edge of the town where his speeder was parked, hoping to get a better view of where the ship was headed. He started becoming jittery, sweat dripping down his brow as he tried to ignore the idea of the unspeakable painful deaths the people would endure in the ship, but there was cause for hope. The ship finally banked to the left as it made its way closer to the storm, but it was still too late to avoid it completely. There was no way a ship of that size would be able to steer clear.

His fears were quickly confirmed. Even though the ship was turning, its rear engines grazed the storm ever-so-slightly. It was just enough, however, to cause significant damage to its propulsion systems. Whoever was piloting the vessel attempted to speed up, but that didn't exactly help the situation. Despite being able to fly for at least a kilometer and a half away from the storm and towards Anchorhead, Annikin could see the blue glow of the engines fade away. Only a few moments later, the ship nose-dived, but straightened out just in time to skid onto the surface of the desert.

Dozens of nearby townspeople heard the nearby commotion and began pouring out of the stores and stopping their walks through the town. None of them, not a single one, did anything besides point and stare, whispering amongst themselves about what happened. Rumors would likely be started about the exact cause, considering gossiping was one of the only ways to keep oneself entertained and in-the-know in such a miserable town.

Annikin wasn't one of those people. He high-tailed it to his speeder and thrust it forward towards the crash site. Debris from nearby settlements was already blowing towards him. He zigzagged around metal flying at him like shrapnel from a grenade. One wrong turn could have killed him, or at least severely injured him. That wouldn't have exactly helped the people in the vessel, so Annikin was extra careful. Normally, he wouldn't even have headed out into the storm. If not for the craft that was only a few meters in front of him, he would have already been in a store cellar hiding from the fury that was about ready to overtake him and the ship.

It may have been a considerable risk to his own life, but he had to find out if the people inside the ship were safe. If they were, he couldn't risk them trying to foolishly evacuate and futilely attempt to escape the impending mayhem from the storm's wrath. Such a stupid move would only lead to their deaths. Annikin had been through more than his fair share of storms to know that the best thing to do was to stay indoors rather than risk being caught outside, but this was a risk he was willing to take this time to help others who might have needed him.

After the brief kilometer and a half trip was over, Annikin leaped out of his speeder and sprinted towards the ship. The storm was only a quarter of a mile away, and he could already feel the sand burrowing into his skin. His vision was becoming obscured and the roar of the storm caused a disorienting feeling inside of him. It was as if the sounds were coming from all directions, or like some sort of monster was approaching from all sides. As many as said before him, it was as if the universe was composed only of noise and he was in its chaotic and brutal center. The epicenter of a storm was not a place where someone would want to be.

It was a matter of seconds before the storm would rip him into dozens of pieces, strewing him across the desert wastes to become wild bantha food. Annikin jumped up and reached a metal rod on the side of the vessel, using it to pull himself up the smooth steel hull as he looked for an entrance hatch. He frantically searched every plate of the hull, finally finding one near what he assumed was the cockpit. He tried to force it up, but it was stuck together from the crinkles in the hull caused by the crash.

Time was short. The storm was ready to overcome him and he still wasn't able to find a way in. Sweat flowed profusely from his entire head, his hair soaked in his own nervousness. Annikin had raced the fiercest racers in dozens of swoop races for the better part of eight years and found himself in an uncountable amount of life or death situations because of it. Not even that scared him more than this storm. Nothing could shake him to the very fiber in his bones more than the calamitous howl of the thunderous pandemonium that was about to be the death of him.

Annikin ripped a small tool from his belt behind his jacket and slammed it into the cracks of the hatch, slowly ripping one side up to let it move on its hinges. Just as he started to duck down, his speeder flew up from the ground and barely missed his head. The situation was finally at a do-or-die point. He either had to get in now or die. There was no third option in a storm of such ferocity, and he had only a precious few seconds to save his life.

The storm reached out its hand to rip Annikin from the hull of the ship, but he would allow nothing of the sort. Not even bothering to give the wave of sand one final look, Annikin jumped down onto a set of crates below the hatch before slamming it shut behind him. The ship began to jolt and rock from side to side. Annikin felt nauseous as the ship nearly fell onto its port side, but he stopped himself from becoming sick.

A scream from a nearby room. Shattering glass in the next corridor. Crates in the storeroom falling and opening, and nearby vents bursting to let steam out in all directions. The rumpus of noises throughout the ship was deafening, and the situation was critical. The storm was much wilder than Annikin had imagined, and it raged on for minute after death-defying minute. He may have thought he was safe once he dove into the ship, but he was quickly realizing that he may still very well have fallen into death's trap. Perhaps he should have stayed in Anchorhead after all.

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There was no vantage point from which to watch a sandstorm where one would have been able to marvel in its epic scale and respect the power that it held. No matter how anyone looked at it, a sandstorm was nothing more than a maelstrom of chaos replete with a thousand different methods of killing. No one could awe in its might because the might was only its way of killing innocents who did nothing to deserve such a violent death.

From a ridge two kilometers away from the storm, the crashed vessel looked like nothing more than a brightly lit speck near the horizon. The small group of hermits that had gathered to watch the storm, however, knew full well what it was. Although anyone watching them would have little choice but to wonder why, the hermits took a great interest in the ship and genuinely feared for the safety of those within it, particularly the young man who had raced towards it only minutes earlier.

Still, it was a moment they had been waiting for, so some couldn't help put a smile on their face even as the silver speck was completely engulfed in the storm's rage. Some would

have considered a smile to be sinister, a vile representation of a disgustingly out-of-touch people. The leader of the group knew otherwise. The crashing of the starship was a time to rejoice, not feel sad. Damage to a ship and what would hopefully be only minor injuries was a miniscule price to pay on the road to galactic harmony.

Prophecy was the leader's word of the day. Some saw prophecy as destructive, but he saw it as a beautiful thing. Why anyone would fear prophecy was something he could never understand. It was his sworn duty to ensure that certain prophecies were brought forth. He was given a mandate by an ancient shaman when he was not but twenty years old, and it was something he had strived for throughout the last thirty-three years.

The leader stepped out away from the group, pulling up his hood to shade his eyes from the scorching sun. Sandstorms may have been destructive, but they did little to fix the heat and the blinding white light that bounced like a ball off the surface of the desert. The man was of medium build, his blue eyes still directed towards the ship. He had not shaved in days, having been engulfed in meditation. He had sensed a turning point such as the arrival of the ship nearly a week earlier, hence his need to center himself in meditation.

The man simply couldn't remove the smile from his face. He was witnessing a moment he had dreamed of for years. Hundreds of others before him had awaited such a moment and believed it would happen in their lifetimes, but only he and his men were the ones fortunate enough to actually see it happen. The crash of the starship meant only one thing, and that was the beginning of a chain reaction that would save them all.

"Fear not for the coming of the blessed son of prophecy," the hermit leader muttered, quoting a passage written by a hermit leader who had lived and died hundreds of years before he was even born. "The whole of life, weary of past transgressions, can finally cry out that the Argus has arrived to break free the manacle of slavery."

With one parting smile towards the crash site, which was finally starting to move into the clear from the storm, the hermit pulled tightly on his wool hood to secure it and adjusted his thin turquoise scarf that protected the skin on his upper chest from the sun. His heavy brown robes may have seen absurd to most, but the hermit and his men had become used to the heavy clothing. Feeling a few degrees hotter was a small price to pay compared to the price that the son of prophecy would begin facing in only a matter of days.