

The background of the page is white, decorated with numerous red blood splatters of varying sizes and shapes. Some splatters are large and dark, while others are small droplets. They are scattered across the page, with a higher concentration in the upper right and lower left areas.

# **CROSS FACTION**

**A SWTOR FANFIC  
BY BRIGHTEPHEMERA**

# **TITLES**

SWTOR fanfiction

Cross Faction

by brightephemera

1<sup>st</sup> edition

Published on the SWTOR official forums under the Alternate Universe Weekly Challenge thread

Blood graphic by DS Williams

45,000 words

OVERCOMING ADVIERCITY was the story of Vierce Savins, veteran resistance fighter and Republic Trooper, during the Trooper's class timeline.

CROSS FACTION is an alternate universe that diverges from OVERCOMING ADVIERCITY during the Trooper's Balmorra. It is predicated on the idea that, during a Havoc Squad resupply on Nar Shaddaa, the Imperial Agent Cipher Nine springs a trap to frame Elara Dorne for treason.

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Bright!verse was not written in a vacuum. It was a product, one of many, of the Short Fiction Weekly Challenge (SFC) on the SWTOR forums. I am deeply indebted to each and every writer and commenter there. They're the ones who told me I had stories worth telling. It is only a partial list when I wave to the earliest authors, Magdalane, Kalterien, Earthmama, iamthehoyden, elliotcat, Tatile, Eanelinea, Striges, kabeone, Morgani, Crezelle, many more...from their inspiration and encouragement all stories grow.

Cross Faction is a non-profit fan made work. Star Wars: The Old Republic and the characters associated with it are the property of BioWare and LucasArts.

## **CONTENT AND SPOILERS**

This story contains descriptions of violence and carnage, rarely graphic.

This story has extensive spoilers for the Trooper through Belsavis and the Agent throughout the storyline (through Corellia).

## **FOREWORD**

The exact genesis of this project has been lost in the dusty corners of my mind. Suffice it to say that once some people on the Short Fic Weekly Challenge thread mentioned character death.

Thus, the worst timeline: what if someone framed Elara Dorne for treason? And what if the implacable Vierce Savins got wind of it?

This is the story of that manhunt, in which Dorne continues to play a role. Vierce, having identified his nemesis, chases him across the galaxy. No holds barred, no quarter given. This is where justice meets revenge. This is Cross Faction.

## **DRAMATIS PERSONAE**

VIERCE SAVINS, Republic Trooper and commander of the special forces Havoc Squad;  
his brother KIRSK SAVINS;



his squad members ARIC JORGAN, ELARA DORNE, TANNO VIK, YUUN, and M1-4X;  
his commander GENERAL GARZA;  
SIS agent JONAS BALKAR;  
CIPHER NINE, Imperial Agent;



supporting companions KALIYO DJANNIS, VECTOR HYLLUS, DOCTOR ECKARD LOKIN, ENSIGN RAINA TEMPLE, and SCORPIO.



<b>TITLES .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>CONTENT AND SPOILERS .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>FOREWORD .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>DRAMATIS PERSONAE .....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>CROSS FACTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. CANON: COMMANDER OF HAVOC SQUAD .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. CANON: BROTHERS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3. CANON: TATOOINE I .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4. CANON: TATOOINE II .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>5. PARTIAL CANON: PUNISHMENT .....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>6. TREASON .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>7. QUERYING THE AFTERMATH .....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>8. THE SIDE JOB .....</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>9. SUSPECT .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>10. WORK NEEDS DOING .....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>11. DORNE .....</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>12. ESCAPED .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>13. OBSTRUCTION .....</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>14. DESTRUCTION .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>15. FREEDOMS .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>16. CHAINS .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>17. CROSSED .....</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>18. TRACKING .....</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>19. NIGHTMARES OF VOSS .....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>20. SEEKING THE DEAD .....</b>	<b>143</b>
<b>21. ANSWERS .....</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>22. QUESTIONS .....</b>	<b>159</b>
<b>EPILOGUE .....</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>CODA: CANON UNIVERSE .....</b>	<b>164</b>



# **CROSS FACTION**

## **1. CANON: COMMANDER OF HAVOC SQUAD**

The first Imperial I ever saw was, when I saw him, in the process of killing my father.

I say "in the process" because he didn't make it fast. He and his friends had ion cells to spare, time to kill, stims to keep the entertainment conscious; besides that the "security sweep" of the occupied city was...nah, enough of that. Spend a day in my head and you'll see the whole thing over again anyway, some days more vivid than others.

So anyway. That was a long time ago. I grew up, made good, joined the Republic Army, and found myself "leader" of the "elite" "Havoc Squad." I try not to be sarcastic, but in effect I'm replacing a bunch of defectors (to the Empire. The Empire!) to command an angry, recently demoted Cathar. That's Havoc Squad. Him and me. I think they're just that desperate to keep the name active rather than admitting the Empire swiped our best.

Jorgan's all right, mind you. He's like my brother only not a scumbag. Well, he's a different kind of scum. It's hard to describe. We can't get six words without picking another fight, but he's good people.

Havoc Squad's first priority? Hunting down its old members, of course. And boy, do I have every reason to want to see them stand and account for themselves.

My first lead was on a planet called Taris. The planetside control center I walked into was busy. Decent variety of people. I couldn't help but notice the bright golden hair of one woman working over a console across the room. It was done up in one of those buns you might call severe, but it looked nice. And when she looked my way...you know how blondes all have gold dust on their eyelashes? I swear I could see it from where I stood.



I reported to a Colonel Gaff, who was in a snit at Havoc Squad having the gall to storm through demanding support for an unspecified mission. He stonewalled me until Sergeant Gold Dust left her console and walked up to directly contradict his claims of knowing nothing useful.

"Patrol teams three, five, and eight were all lost, all without explanation."

This news might have been more tactically interesting if it hadn't been delivered in a pitch-perfect Imperial accent.

The woman and her stupid yellow bun came to stand opposite Colonel Gaff. They glared at each other. I glared at her, but I don't think anybody was counting that, except maybe Jorgan.

She turned her eyes, dull overgrown lashes and all, away from the colonel and saluted me crisply. "Elara Dorne, sir. Sergeant, first class, commander of Search and Rescue Squad 204." An Imp, commanding one of our squads. This was new.

"Lieutenant Vierce Savins. Havoc Squad." I glared straight past her. "Colonel, is there anyone you can recommend to brief me on this matter?"

Dorne didn't respond to the slight. Gaff processed my displeasure and gave me a sullen sneer. "That would be Sergeant Dorne. She's all yours."

"If you would, sir." The sergeant tilted her head toward a conference room and led me and Jorgan in, standing by to shut the door after us.

I had work to do, I reminded myself. Leads to pursue, and somehow Sergeant Imperial was the only one talking. I wouldn't take her information at face value, but there was a chance it was better than nothing. Therefore: "If you have information for me, sergeant, I'll be glad to hear it."

She nodded crisply – crisp was a big thing with her – and laid out the whole story of the base's standard patrols, their usual patterns, the communications of the missing patrols, every item of standard procedure they had missed. She had paragraph citations for the procedural violations. The constant rules mentions, done in that accent, really made her seem like an Imperial trooper scribbling "I AM LEGIT REPUBLIC" on her helmet.

But she got me the information to start. Whoever was screwing with our patrols might have other information I needed, and I didn't have any other leads, and it was possible that Colonel Gaff didn't actively encourage Imp operatives to send officers he disagreed with into deathtraps. It was possible.

I thanked her, as politely as I could stand to - she did have the uniform, after all, so I figured I could pull together some courtesy - and excused myself.

Jorgan fell into step beside me on our way out. "That was...interesting. I've had drill sergeants more relaxed than that woman. Not to mention that accent."

"Yeah, well. Imps aren't known for their capacity to relax."

"There's a story with her," said Jorgan. "But I don't think we're getting it until we finish this little job."

"I have a better idea. We skip the story." I rubbed my neck and growled. "Let's go. Sooner we find Needles, sooner we get off this rock."

\*

The less I say about the operation to reach Needles' freakish experimental lab, the better. At least we gave the Havoc Squad defector the execution he deserved.

I returned to my ship, sent in a barebones action report and tried to take my mind off the things I had seen in Needles' lab by playing Gunners. Classic holo game. They still have it in a lot of arcades. Simple, yes, but it's soothing when you don't want to think.

A holocall brought me out of it. My brother Kirsk showed up. His jacket was half shredded and his face looked bruised. Not the worst I've seen him at, but bad all the same.

"Kirsk? What happened?"

"Uh, a few things," he said, "it's been exciting. For instance, did you know that Rodian dermatitis not only develops pungent symptoms within an hour, but can

actually spread through shiv-to-dermis contact? Also, could you spot me five thousand credits?"

Kirsk held up his arm. It dripped.

"Credits?" I said. "Credits are your priority here? For goodness' sake, hang up and get to a doctor!"

"Only doctor 'round here who won't turn me in requires cash up front."

"You're on Coruscant, Kirsk. There's gotta be a thousand doctors within a klick's radius."

"Yeah, and every last one of 'em is very interested in either the police feed or the local bounty board. Only one I can trust is the guy who takes cash."

"I don't believe this."

"I'll pay you back, big brother. Just sayin', this...uh...condition...isn't getting any fresher."

"You got it. I can manage five." *Barely*. "I'll zap it by right away."

Kirsk beamed. "You're the best." He tightened a bandage around his arm and added, cheerfully, "So, how're you doing?"

"Well, I just watched a man forcibly inject one of his underlings with a weaponized rakghoul strain, then maintain an amused-sounding running monologue explaining the agonizing transformation as it happened. So I stopped the doctor, and the new rakghoul, and then my subordinate, who's usually a decent guy, chewed me out for not wanting to wrap the remaining pathogen up in a bow and hand it to our weapons lab. Now I have a hell of a headache and I probably have to kill you because I ran off my mouth and dropped sensitive inf—"

"Oh, ha, wow, that's interesting! Gotta run!" Kirsk wasn't even looking at me. His last word was almost lost in the sound of blaster fire. He managed one last dazzling grin before sprinting out of the holocam image. A second later the call went dead.

"Dammit, Kirsk." I scraped together five thousand credits and wired them to the last known dead drop I had for my little brother. On the assumption that he was

still alive. He usually was, after exits like that; it just took him a few weeks to resurface. That idiot.

\*

No sooner had I arranged the transfer than a call came up on the ship's main holo. It was General Garza. I called Jorgan in and activated the holo.

"General." I saluted.

The older woman nodded curtly. "Savins. I received your report. Very good work. I'm most impressed."

"Thank you, sir."

"I am disappointed that we couldn't recover a sample of the weaponized rakghoul strain."

Jorgan and Garza gave me matching hard looks. *Right. Yeah. Sorry my conscience inconvenienced you.*

"But," said Garza, "you did get the primary objective. Now, having reviewed the relevant information, I'm wondering what you thought of your contact, Sergeant Dorne."

"Dorne?" *Do you have any idea how far down the list of things I want to think about she is?* "I guess she got the job done."

"I looked over her service record. Most impressive, I must say. Were you aware that Dorne served with the Imperial military for almost two years?"

"Not just Imp, military Imp. That's great, General."

"It left a disciplined mind. Sergeant Dorne earned more commendations in her two years of Imperial service than most soldiers earn in ten."

"So she's good at being an Imp. With respect, is this leading somewhere? Because I'd like to be out of her neck of the woods soon."

Garza ignored my outburst. "Since joining the Republic, she's earned two Medals of Valor, both for rescuing wounded soldiers under fire behind enemy lines. This woman has led an exceptional career."

"I'm not too impressed by her intimacy with enemy lines."

Garza's look got even sharper. "Sergeant Dorne is Havoc Squad material, Savins, and she's already successfully demonstrated the ability to work with you. With her you'll be halfway to a full squad."

"General, I'm not thrilled about having an Imp in my squad."

She gave me the no-excuses look. "You don't have to be thrilled," she said sternly. "And I think it might go better for you if you avoid calling her an 'Imp'."

"Yes, sir," I said, trying my best to sound professional. It came out sulky and I knew it.

"I'll handle the paperwork. You go give her the news." Garza's image flickered out.

I rubbed my eyes. "Tell me I hallucinated that one."

"No sir, that just happened," said Jorgan. "Garza's got a point about her record."

"She's putting an Imperial in Havoc Squad, Jorgan. Does that not get a reaction out of you?"

"Seems to me she got our Republic operation done fast and right. Takes guts to become a defector, Savins, and she's got skill besides."

"Fine. Fine. Eat first, then let's bring her in."

We ate quickly, then left the ship and headed on back to the control center, where Dorne was working her station. She looked up when we approached.

"Lieutenant?" With an 'f'. "Is there something else I can do for you?"

*Scrub the accent or get out of my life, or maybe both.* "General Garza's having you transferred to Havoc Squad," I said. "You'll be shipping out with me."

"A transfer? To Havoc Squad?" She lit up, way outside what I would've thought that little rules recitation machine could express. "Lieutenant, this is...this is the greatest honor of my career. I'm speechless."

*If only.*

Jorgan spoke up while I practiced biting my tongue. "Membership in Havoc Squad is the highest achievement in all of the Republic Armed Forces, Sergeant. Congratulations." He saluted.

*Yeah, what he said. Except without the congratulations.*

Dorne saluted back. "I'll prepare my Regulation Six Personnel Transfer documents at once!" she gushed. *How do you remember which rulebook you're quoting all the time, anyway? Do Imps use different document numbering systems?*

"I'll meet you back at the ship, Sergeant," I said. She saluted me and headed out with a spring in her step.

"Try to be a little less gracious," growled Jorgan, "I think somebody in orbit didn't pick up on the 'you're unwelcome' vibe."

"The sergeant's still happy, isn't she? So's Garza. We hit our happiness quota. I don't have to contribute. So move out."

He scowled harder at the look on my face. "Sir, a commander should— "

"We're not discussing this, Sergeant. Move. Out."

I hurried to the ship and settled down to glare at Gunner on the bridge console. My reflexes were off. I was doing a terrible job. This, on top of everything. I couldn't even blow up little digital mutant mynock. That rakghoul victim's changing screams were still ringing in my ears, I was freshly broke, my brother was probably dying of an exotic stupidity-transmitted disease, Jorgan was mad at me again, I had an *Imp* on my ship and everybody thought that was a great thing, and I couldn't even blow up digital mutant mynock.

She found me on the bridge while I was still struggling to get past the end rush of level eight. "Sir," she said, and waited for me to pause the game and look up. "My equipment and personal effects have been stowed in full accordance with transport code section two." Then, warmly, "If I may say so again, sir, it is truly an honor to be selected for Havoc Squad."

"General Garza doesn't choose slouches," I said. It was civil. I can do civil.

"I intend to begin reviewing and memorizing all relevant dossiers and intelligence reports on our next assignment immediately. If I discover any points of confusion or areas where I believe I can contribute, I'll submit a full 587-B report."

*Are you for real?* "Or just talk to me, Sergeant."

"If...you prefer, sir," she said doubtfully. Then she saluted and walked out.

Jorgan passed her on her way down the stairs. He stepped onto the bridge, leaned up against the wall and crossed his arms. "Can't imagine why she would rather submit paperwork via HQ than talk with you," he drawled.

"Would you stop that?"

"I can give as good as I get, Savins, but you can't expect the jackass command style to work with everyone. Way I see it, she's pointing her blaster at the same guys we are now, so you may as well start giving her some respect."

"Way I see it, I'm the CO and she was transferred here against my stated recommendation on qualifications I have yet to see." I turned away. "Now beat it. If I don't finish level eight by bedtime I'll be forced to declare this day a total loss."

\*

"No, no, there's some juice left in him. Or we can add some."

I had finally wriggled out of Mama's grip, drawn by my father's screams. I made it up the stairs and paused in the doorway, briefly, staring at my beaten, blaster-scorched father and the two Imperials standing over him. They were touring the town just because they could and they just dropped in on us to have a good time. The bigger one reached down with a syringe and injected Da with something or other. The littler one hauled him up to up to his knees, then kicked him down again. Da stiffened, arched, seemed to revive a little as the shot took effect, and that's when I finally got over my fear and charged.

In my memory the bigger Imperial just laughed and backhanded me, hard enough to knock me out until long after they were gone and my father was dead. In

dreams, though, that moment of watching the Imperial's kick connect kept playing slow, every fresh injury raging clear on Da's pale skin.

I woke up to the sound of somebody pounding on the door to my quarters. I coughed painfully on my way to answer.

Jorgan and Sergeant Imperial were standing out there. "Sir," said Jorgan. "I know it's standard, but she insisted on checking." He jerked a thumb at Dorne and stepped aside.

She was carrying a little case. "You were shouting, sir. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice low and gravelly. "I'm fine."

"If you prefer, I have a sedative available." She opened the case and pulled out a syringe.

That just snapped something. "YOU DON'T PUT NEEDLES IN ME!" I bellowed. "Get back, stay away, and put in some motherfucking earplugs if I'm bothering you!"

Jorgan shrugged at Dorne and padded away. Dorne shrank back, quickly hid the syringe, and stammered "Y–yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir." I turned right around and went back to bed rather than stand there fighting the urge to do something I would regret.

I slept dreamlessly after that, but woke up feeling raw-eyed and unrested. I showered, got dressed, went to the mess for breakfast. Jorgan was doing something at the counter. Dorne came in a couple of minutes later.

"Sergeant," I said by way of greeting.

"Leftenant," she said.

I hated her being there, being on my ship and in my life at all, but since she was, something was bugging me and I had to set it right. Even if I wasn't counting professional concerns, I wasn't raised to menace women half my size. "I'm sorry about last night. I was out of line."

She looked down at her rations. "It's all right, sir. I understand you weren't yourself."



"Obviously when we're out there in the line of fire, or medical attention has to happen, do what you need to."

"Yes, sir. Sir," she continued – *dammit, woman, leave well enough alone* – "there are resources established under Regulation 529-B to provide for counseling and other treatment for trauma incurred in the line of duty."

"Oh?" I said. "They gonna fix up things that happened seventeen years ago?"

She stared at me. She could do the math. I wasn't a soldier in the line of duty then, no more than any kid in an occupation zone is.

"It was a guy with an accent a lot like yours waving needles at the time."

Her brow scrunched up. She was prettier, I thought irrelevantly, when she smiled. Not that I had seen much of that in the week of her work here. "There's a reason I left, sir," she said, quietly, steadily.

That stopped me cold. Why hadn't I thought of it earlier? She was only here because she had walked out on them.

Did that change anything? Could it, really? Or did defectors take the rottenness with them? The mere fact that she had chosen to leave didn't make anything much easier just then. Still...

"I was out of line again, wasn't I," I said glumly.

"Yes, sir," volunteered Jorgan.

"Would you stop that?" I asked him.

"Yes, sir. As soon as you stop being wrong." He grinned maliciously at me.

I decided to ignore him. "I apologize, Dorne. I'm...just gonna go be elsewhere now."

I walked off feeling more or less like I'd done the right thing by trying to be civil. But until I could get over thinking of Dorne as an Imp – and how could I get over it, the way she talked? – I could not possibly feel right about having her in my home.



## **2. CANON: BROTHERS**

I picked my brother up from a rooftop gunfight on Nar Shaddaa. No, I don't know what was going on there. Sometimes with Kirsk it's better not to ask.

While we were picking up and hauling out, half a dozen blaster rifles still firing full rate at us, Jorgan confronted me and an uncommonly ragged-looking Kirsk in the holo room. "Sir, can I ask what we're doing yet?" He glared at Kirsk.

"Rescuing the pathetically needy," I explained.

"I see that, sir."

"That's all the information I'm running on. Ask him. Anyway, we're leaving now." I yelled up toward the bridge. "Hey, Dorne, I'll take over."

"I can drive," suggested Kirsk.

"Not a chance."

He followed me up to the bridge anyway. And stopped, and, right on cue, softly whistled.

Sergeant Dorne looked up, startled. Her eyes flickered to me. "Sir?"

"Sergeant Dorne, this is my brother Kirsk, who is going to leave you alone until he leaves this ship. Kirsk, this is Sergeant Dorne, and your harassing her would almost certainly end up as a demerit on my record."

"Ooh, give me a little more incentive, why don't you." He smiled smoothly at Dorne. I whacked him in the back of the head.

"Sir," Dorne said uneasily, "a civilian's presence here is highly irregular."

"I never broke a rule that didn't need breaking, Sergeant. He stays." I stood aside to let her leave, then took her place at the controls. "Kirsk, where'm I dropping you off?"

"Uh, heat signature's a little high right now, um, anywhere. Mind if I lay low with you for a few days?"

"That really is a little awkward on an active-duty ship."

"Things are tight."

That was code for total desperation. "Of course you can stay. Try to behave. My superiors call, stay out of sight."

"You got it. So anyway, her. You've mentioned her once or twice...Imperial defector?"

"Yeah."

"Huh. And they assigned her to you? What the blazes were they thinking?"

"She's Havoc Squad caliber, they tell me. She pulls her weight, I guess." I rubbed my neck. The tension there was spiking. "Believe me, if I had the beginnings of a whisper of an echo of an excuse to get rid of her, she'd be long gone. As it is I keep getting dirty looks for mistreating her."

"Does she know why you hate her with a passion that's leaking all over the visible spectrum?"

"She's got an idea. She doesn't need my life story."

"I guess that's fair. To one of you. Explaining what it was like where you're from would be fair, too. To the other one of you. That's rough, brother."

"No kidding."

"Moving along. This one of those rigs where I have to sleep on the floor?"

"Pfft, no. Get Jorgan to show you a bunk. And don't piss him off, he's a biter."

"Like that's anything new." Kirsk grinned and showed himself out.

\*

We were given a minor assignment elsewhere on Nar Shaddaa; truth be told, we were killing time until the next lead on the Havoc Squad defectors presented itself. I got up early on day three, received a minor mission via holo, went out to round people up. Passing by the mess I suddenly heard Kirsk laughing alongside

this bright musical laugh that stuck me in place for half a second before I got a hold of myself.

I poked my head in and saw Kirsk sitting opposite Sergeant Dorne. Kirsk appeared to be in fine form. Dorne turned to me and the cheer on her face died. She recovered a fake polite smile a second later. "Sir."

"Sergeant." I nodded. "Kirsk."

"I was just telling your sergeant here about that time on Coruscant when for complex but very compelling reasons I was hired to impersonate a professor's assistant for one of their biochem lectures. Absolute worst stimchem trip I've had in my life."

"I've helped him identify two brushes with death he didn't even know he had had, going through that laboratory setup," said Dorne. "I'm not sure what to say about the safety standards of the Institute."

"I know what to say," said Kirsk. "Thank the stars I'm not an academic man." He finished off a glass of something or other. "Anyway, big brother, you after something?"

"Yeah, actually. I need Dorne in the field. Jorgan and Forex are already good to go."

Dorne leaped to her feet. "Of course, sir," she said hurriedly, and rushed past me.

"Well," said Kirsk, watching her go. "She's not terrified of you or anything."

"Terrified? Her? Nah. She's just really enthusiastic about orders."

"Whatever you say," he said, cool and skeptical.

"I gotta be out for the day. You sticking around?"

"No way I'm showing my face on this planet anytime soon. Yeah, I'll stay here, hold down the fort."

"No joyrides."

"Dammit, Vierce."

"Get your own rig."

"I did. It got stolen."

"Someday you'll have to fill me in on that story."

"Someday. Get a move on."

\*

Kirsk greeted us back at the ship that evening with an elaborate Tionese spread which, a check of the comm logs confirmed, was fast-food delivery charged to my account. Delicious, anyway. M1-4X stuck around to chatter with the rest of us until supper was cleared.

Kirsk excused himself after a while and, with an unobtrusive gesture, signaled me to follow him. He led me into my own quarters and brought up the console.

"So I was being an irresponsible security risk because the antique file system you guys have on this ship is mesmerizing. I couldn't resist."

"Kirsk, if you compromised classified information you know I'm gonna have to--"

He raised one hand, typing with the other. "Nothing like that, nothing like that. I think. So I was skimming things and I spotted something wrapped up tight in some mad encryption. Imperial encryption."

My stomach flopped. "Dorne?"

"Addressed to her, though it's been sitting there eighteen hours and no one's opened it that I could see. I'm not sure she knows it's there yet."

"What's inside? Imp crypto's a specialty of yours, you must know."

"But of course." With a flourish Kirsk pulled up a little holo of a blond guy about our age.

"Elara," said the recorded message boy. "It's me, Aleksei. I...I hope you're well. It's been a long time."

"Boyfriend?" I muttered. Kirsk shook his head.

"I'm sorry to contact you like this, but I need your help. My men and I...we're as good as dead. We're on Nar Shaddaa – we were caught tampering with one of the Hutts' operations. We never dreamed the slugs would have so much security."

"Poor slobs," mumbled Kirsk. "Poor, stupid slobs."

"These Hutts are Imperial allies, Elara. There is no rescue team. We'll be disavowed and left to die. Please – you're my only hope now." His image vanished.

I tried to talk around the huge hollow space in my chest. "An ex in Imperial spec ops? I didn't even think of that one."

"Not an ex. I did some sniffing. Aleksei Dorne is her younger brother."

"A brother. Huh. You know if they've been talking?"

"I didn't have time to check. You know I don't do politics nowadays, but this seemed important."

"Don't say anything for a minute." Kirsk only went along with that when he felt like it, but for once he gave me space to think. "Enemy combatant, related to her, here. That's...not unexpected. Right? We had people with split families back home. Collaborators who had some genetic material in common with human beings. It doesn't...dammit, do you have any idea how hard I've been working to not fly off the handle at her?"

"No, actually," said Kirsk, "but recalling your history I can imagine."

"I'm trying to be fair! How am I supposed to be fair with something like this? I should hand the recording upstairs and go clear his whole squad out while they're vulnerable, is what I should do. But her...why would he call her of all people? She's neck-deep in Republic monitoring."

"Things got tight, and she's kin."

"She files reports when she talks to Imperial-sounding shopkeepers. Contact this big is...that's insane."

"Which may be why she didn't even open an Imp-marked message."

"If she's on the level, why not just call someone to review it?"

"Because that request goes through you. Did I mention she's terrified of you?"

"She is not."

"Vierce, you just found out she has a brother and your first reaction was 'hey, can I kill him?'"

"That's my first reaction to all Imps."

"Yeah. It's scary."

"I don't see what I can do here. The kindest thing would be to just lock this so she can't access it, pass it upstairs and let them clean it up, because if I do run across his people it's going to be blood."

"You could try capture."

"Since when do I capture Imps?"

"Since you suited up Republic? Think about it. Show up. Heartwarming family reunion. Grab some souvenir POWs. Everybody goes home happy except the Imps. That sounds practically ideal."

"Or show up, trap, get shot at, Blondie and Blondie skip home happy."

"I thought she would never try to sneak contact?"

"It isn't sneaking if you shot your way through your CO to do it." I ran my hands through my hair. "That's ridiculous, I know, so don't say it. It's just hard. Why'd it have to be kin? Remember when you were little and I told you Imps didn't have families, they just came out of evil spawning pools?"

"Yeah. I was very disappointed when I learned the boring truth. But think about this. Maybe it's legit, the kid's desperate, and we can win you a nice little resume buff plus major squad morale points by checking it out. And if they turn it ugly, well, you and I haven't sprung an Imp trap together in a long time. It'll be fun. But if this guy's for real, he has nowhere else to go. The Empire just shook him off."

"Why would we want them?"



"Because the alternative is executing your squadmate's brother?"

"I can do that, Kirsk. You remember."

He looked away. "Different times, Vierce. A scared kid who just got written off by the only boss he's ever known isn't really the same as a collaborator. This Aleksei guy never had a choice." He let that sink in for a little while. "You could at least hear what he has to say. And don't forget your own sergeant. If you and I got separated, with no real hope of talking again, and then a chance came up while one of us was in a tight spot, and somebody decided to withhold that chance, would you stand for that?"

"You know there'd be hell to pay. But unless these guys are miraculously ready to lay down arms, this'll be the mother of all awkward family reunions."

"That's why you an' me will be there. To keep it polite." He caught me before I could object. "I'm sure you and Sergeant Cannon are good, but you want a security man who knows Imps and knows how to stop you from doing something stupid, and the only person in the galaxy with both those qualifications is me."

"You realize I'm only even considering this because it's you asking."

"I know. So, you going to talk to her?"

"Yeah. I'll talk to her."

"Aw. You're mellowing, big brother. This just might work out."

"Do not get warm and fuzzy on me."

"Me? Nah. My only interest here is in looking out for the downtrodden little brothers of scary justice machines."

I left to find Dorne and call her into the briefing room, where I secured the door. "Sergeant, Kirsk brought something to my attention and I am very interested in hearing your explanation."

"I'm not sure what you're referring to, sir," she said apprehensively, "but I'll try."

I put on Aleksei's recording.

The moment his image appeared she went dead white. She held still listening, and looked to me the second it was done. "Sir, I didn't know. I received it just yesterday, I was debating who to go to for permission to open it. I wasn't just going to start viewing something that might be compromising."

"When's the last time you spoke to your brother, Dorne?"

"Over three years ago. Before I defected. I haven't...I didn't know what happened to him. I honestly never expected to see his face again."

"You realize the military interest in this target."

She flinched a little to hear the term. "Sir, I believe if I speak to him I may be able to convince him and his people to defect. If he's been abandoned as he says, he has nowhere else to go. I can talk him into it."

"Yeah. The possibility has been considered. And since I am related to the worst bleeding-heart in the galaxy, I'm willing to consider arranging a meeting. I will be present for any such meeting, but I'll let you do the talking until and unless there's trouble." Talking, after all, wasn't my specialty in that situation. I took a deep breath. "The peaceful solution is up to you."

She nodded slowly. "Sir, I, I wouldn't have expected..." Then she managed to meet my eyes. "I wouldn't have expected this opportunity. It means a great deal to me."

I nodded. "Yeah. But you know I have to take 'em in no matter which way they go."

"I understand. But I do believe I can bring Aleksei to our side. You won't be disappointed, I promise." She went to leave. When she opened the door Kirsk was right there. She jumped a little. "Oh! – I'm sorry. I, the lieutenant was just discussing the message you found. I understand I have you to thank for the generous offer your brother made?"

"Me?" drawled Kirsk. "No, miss. I just spotted the incoming security question. Talking it over with you, looking for a diplomatic solution for your brother, that was all his idea."

"Oh." She blinked rapidly a bit while she processed that. Then she shot one last wide-eyed look at me and edged past Kirsk to leave.

"What was that?" I demanded.

He grinned. "You'll thank me later."

"I don't see what..."

"Oh, I know. But you will."

### **3. CANON: TATOOINE I**

Tatooine. We landed in Anchorhead based on a vague tip and soon found that the town had bigger problems than one stray soldier.

I ran into to the mayor's office dust-covered, sweating, and carrying a whole lot of questions. "Mayor, I know you said this morning that there's been activity like this, but the attack we just saw...those explosions were beyond reason."

Mayor Klerren peered anxiously at me. "Is anyone else...?"

My team filed into the mayor's office as I spoke. "No. We intercepted a couple of droids carrying additional payloads, but we neutralized 'em. Did your man say there were sixty-four dead and wounded from just the first one of those today? And there's been more than one wave of this?"

"Yes, you heard right."

I looked back at Jorgan. We had a bomb expert on the list of Havoc Squad defectors. Name of Fuse. If there was sudden new high-yield bomb activity at the same time as vague reports of a former Havoc man here...well.

The mayor's man skittered in from the inner office. "Sir, there's someone on the line. He claims to have vital information about the bomber's identity."

What? Really," said Mayor Klerren. "Put him through."

The assistant routed something onto the holo. A pale nervous-looking Zabrak showed up. "Ah! Uh, hello there, Mayor Klerren, sir. My name is Vanta Bazren, and I have vital information for you regarding..." Then he noticed me. "I'm sorry, is that...Sergeant, is that you? It's me, Fuse! From Ord Mantell, remember?"

I avoided laughing, but only barely. "Yeah. I don't forget." I turned to the mayor. "Sir, this individual has sensitive information I'm going to need to extract. Would you mind excusing us? I promise to get all the information he has on your bomber."

"Er, yes, of course." Mayor Klerren gestured to his assistant and the two left.

"Now, then." I turned back to Fuse. "I was saying. I remember you and Ord Mantell very well, Fuse."

"I...I'm sorry. I-I don't know what I was thinking."

"As I recall, you were thinking 'the Empire respects its warriors' and you were eager to bring them a 'present' to help them with it. Anything else you need your memory refreshed on?"

"I know, uh, you might not believe this, but...I'm really, really glad you're here. If anyone can shut down the Imps and stop the bombings in Anchorhead, it's you."

"Shutting down Imps is a specialty of Havoc Squad."

He swallowed hard. "Please, I-I don't have much time. If they catch me transmitting, they'll, uh...it won't be good. The Imps brought me here to design bombs. Desert planet, middle of nowhere, makes sense, right? Then Colonel Gorik, the Imp leader, wants to test the bombs. But, he wouldn't use the empty deserts – he wanted a live testing ground. He chose Anchorhead."

"He just decided to go testing your inventions on the nearest innocents?" said Jorgan.

"That's the Empire for you," I said. My throat felt tight.

"Not every Imperial officer is a murderous psychopath, but still. Yeah. Pretty horrible. As soon as I found out...I told Gorik I wouldn't do it. Never. So his men locked me up in here. Gorik's afraid of Tavus, or he would've just killed me. Only you can stop Gorik now. Let me help you – let me tell you who's putting the bomb droids together."

"You'll tell me a hell of a lot more than that, Fuse."

"I will! I'll help you find Gorik's base, I'll turn myself in. Just please, stop the droid production first so they won't hurt anyone else." He started typing at the console on his end, sending information about the droid facility over.

"Fine. I clean that up. Then I take you into custody."

If he had stuck around on Ord Mantell he might know me well enough to know exactly what I meant by "take into custody." But he hadn't. Instead he sounded relieved. "Yes, sir. – I have to go now. Fuse out."

I grabbed the name and coordinates he sent us, loaded that up to my own datapad. Then I turned to the rest of the squad. "We move. Now."

\*

The bombing-droid factory Fuse directed us to was entirely run by Geonosians. I would've liked to get some information out of them, only they didn't speak Basic. They didn't really speak at all so much as shoot at us.

I can work with that.

We cleaned the factory up, swiped what few files we could find to upload for analysis. There were no immediate signs of how they had gotten their orders and payments. So we headed on back to Anchorhead.

\*

"Excuse me, sir. May I have a moment of your time?"

I stopped what I was doing. Sergeant Dorne and I hadn't said a whole lot to each other since dealing with her brother on Nar Shaddaa, an incident where I mostly stood there waiting to shoot any Imp who put a toe out of line and she talked her Imp brother and his disavowed-by-the-Empire squad into coming over to our side. That was just about the least pleasant noncombat experience of my life, but Kirsk's presence had kept me in line and Dorne had had the sense not to try to get cozy over it. "All right," I said.

Dorne nodded thanks, but didn't relax from her rigid attention. "As a condition of my service in the Republic military, Personnel Division requires that I report regularly on my activities."

Really? So there is somebody else in the service who worries.

"However, my Havoc Squad missions are classified and cannot be shared with Personnel Division." More and more concern crept into her voice with every word. "I'd like to ask if you would vouch for me when I report in."

I wasn't afraid to speak directly to her experience with me. "Sure. I can do that."

She avoided eye contact as we made for the holocom and she placed a secure call. "Captain Kalor?" she opened. "Elara Dorne, personnel number 22-795, reporting as per regulation 449."

"Please, Elara," said the balding Mirialan, "you don't have to give me the full rundown every time. I know who you are. How are things?"

She had a friend. Interesting.

"Well enough, sir," she said cautiously. "Allow me to introduce you to the commander of Havoc Squad – my CO. Sir, this is Captain Kalor, Army Personnel Division."

I nodded. "Good to see you're on top of things, sir."

"Perfectly normal process, Lieutenant. Thanks for your time." He turned his attention to Dorne. "Tell me about being in the top squad in the Republic, Elara. You must be keeping very busy."

"I'm sorry, Captain," she said in her best rules-stickler voice, "but you aren't authorized to know the details of Havoc Squad's activities. My CO will have to vouch for me from now on." Again with the dread.

"What?" The Mirialan scowled. "Elara, I don't want to be a hard case, but rules are rules – this 'top secret' junk won't fly."

Oh, that wouldn't do. "Top secret is a rule, too, Captain," I said, "and it's one neither the sergeant nor I can break. All Havoc Squad operations are classified, but I can tell you Sergeant Dorne has been well behaved." Well behaved enough that even I couldn't fault her for anything she'd done so far. I wasn't sure what else to do with this process, but the personnel guy clearly wasn't satisfied. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience," I added.

"Heh. Inconvenience." His manner was rapidly dropping into angry territory. "Just carry on, Elara. We'll talk about this later, after I've had a word with my superiors. Kalor out." The holo turned off.

Dorne looked a little green. "I wasn't expecting him to react so strongly. Surely he didn't expect me to report on classified information?"

"He's probably not used to keeping tabs on Spec Forces. Not too many defectors end up there. But I'm guessing regulations are on your side."



"Yes, sir. I'm just surprised the captain didn't agree."

"He questions you like that, he's questioning Havoc Squad. That won't fly."

She nodded, but she didn't seem very reassured. "In any case, thank you for your time."

"You let me know when he calls back." I didn't want to be surprised by any explosion that came of this. Plus, that captain was challenging my role as well as hers. If he wanted to pick on her he'd better pick on her on her own merits, not some trumped-up excuse involving Havoc Squad.

"I will," she said. "Thank you."

That had turned from a routine job detail into a favor pretty quickly. Not something I wanted to make a habit of. But things were settled for now. So I moved on.

\*

Fuse was on the line when we reported the mayor's office the following morning. Fuse was apologizing. Again. I wanted to deck him. Again.

"I'm so sorry, Mayor Klerren. I, uh...I just, I never imagined it would come to this, you know? Innocent people dead, all because of my designs. I...I was so stupid."

"Can't argue with that," I announced as I walked into holocam view. "Droid factory's down. The Geonosians were working for the Imps, all right, but I couldn't get much more from them."

Fuse looked miserable. "I know it's...well, thanks for trusting me, after everything that's happened. I really do want to help. Colonel Gorik is...well, he isn't pleased about you being here, Lieutenant. He has the entire operation on high alert."

"He's right to be scared."

"Yeah, I'd say so," said Mayor Klerren, looking at me.

Fuse gestured vaguely. "I, uh, I think it's actually going to help us. See, the location of the base they're holding me in is a total secret. I have no idea where we are."

"You have got to be kidding me." If I could've killed him by stare alone I would've. "How do you pull together the brainpower required to breathe?"

"I, uh. I – look, there's not much time. Gorik's got commando teams patrolling the whole region; if you hit one they should have the coordinates. I can describe the patrol stuff I overheard, I hope it's enough for you to locate them. It, uh, it may not be long before Gorik decides to pull out entirely, Lieutenant. He's worried that more Republic reinforcements are coming. So try to move fast."

"I'll do that, Fuse. I am really, really looking forward to seeing you in person."

The mayor was eyeing me uncertainly. "You're heading out, then?"

"Looks like it."

"Good luck out there. You'll need it."

I led the squad back out into the glaring daylight. Fuse's stupid stuttering was still echoing in my ears. "I am going to kill that Imp-loving embarrassment," I said.

"At least he's sorry," said Jorgan. "With any luck he'll bring something useful back with him when he surrenders."

"I'd be surprised if he manages to bring both his own boots with him. Why would we take him in alive?"

"He is helping us. Look at him. He's got nobody in there, and even knowing we're not friends either he's trying to do the right thing. Takes guts. He could make out all right at court-martial, maybe do something with his life after. He sounds like a good kid."

"Jorgan. Don't say that again."

#### **4. CANON: TATOOINE II**

Evening, and I was on edge. I'd just as soon not go over what memories were playing in my head. I needed to sleep, so I headed to the medbay to get that process started. Picked up a little sleepy shot, a drop of anti-anxiety stuff, brought out a little whisky – a combination that is strictly prohibited, but a guy my size doesn't necessarily notice any one factor by itself, so the combo helps – and then I headed back to my quarters, loaded up, and just had to sit around waiting for it to kick in.

Sergeant Dorne wandered by not long after and stopped in the doorway. Her eyes immediately went to the syringe on the nightstand. "Leftenant, our supplies appear to be down by – sir?"

"I was just prepping for sleep. Every now and then the shots help."

"Shots," she said, emphasizing the plural. "...And is that a flask?"

"Yes, Sergeant, it is. Minor cocktail, I've found it works." My lazy warm veins agreed with me.

"Sir, if you actually mixed alcohol with the deprovanatol and the grillamine, that's incredibly dangerous."

"Too late to stop it, doctor. Though for what it's worth, it hasn't killed me yet."

She gave me an exasperated look. And was almost certainly trying to work out how to yell at me without pissing me off.

"I'll be fine," I said. "Nights like this I don't wake up shouting, and that lets us all sleep. So anyway. Did you need something?"

"Yes." She brought up a datapad. Of course she had a datapad. And gave it to me. "Squad status and activity report, classification level secret. If you could confirm what I've entered and finish the summary for the last four week's activities, then sign, I'll get this submitted."

I frowned at the datapad. "I understand this when we're not producing concrete results, but didn't they notice what we've brought in lately? What else matters?"

"It's purely a formality, sir," she said nervously.

"I know, I know. It's just obnoxious. In my last outfit our status reports consisted of, A, getting the job done, and then B, calling up the guys next door and letting 'em know we're still alive."

"Your...last outfit, sir? Prior to the Republic Army?"

I got a slightly unpleasant feeling in my stomach, but I still felt pretty relaxed.

"Yeah, I was in the resistance against the Empire on a planet called Kegled II."

"Ah. Your record did mention your home planet. I'm sorry, sir."

"Sorry? What, had you actually heard of the place?"

"Unfortunately yes." She looked genuinely disgusted. "Rumors, that's all, but that was enough."

"I see." Well, that was way past time to steer away from the subject. "So as I was saying, I never had to fill out – what is this? – Form RAR-002 for the resistance. We had a much simpler system."

"You had many fewer people to keep track of," she pointed out.

"I guess." I frowned at the datapad and scribbled an uninformative sentence so as to take up space in that wide empty status field. "Did you have to fill this stuff out at your last job?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Due punctually every two weeks. It was rather longer than this one. Several more detailed questions."

I scrolled down the entire awful questionnaire and back up. "...You're joking. Right?"

"No, sir."

Of course not. Dorne didn't joke. "How the hell did your people find time to do"...no use getting into that, so..."all the other stuff...if they were filling out some juiced-up version of this every two weeks?"

"Mostly by not taking time off to sleep, sir." Cool voice, straight face. I suddenly wondered whether I'd been wrong about her making jokes.

"So that's why you defected," I said, nodding sagely. "To slack off."

She blinked. "That wasn't my primary reason."

I started to suspect that the whisky was doing the talking for me. "Of course not. The rations must've been up there on the list, too."

She raised her eyebrows.

"For years," I explained, "half my meals were rations we stole from the local Imps. And let me tell you, the day I got off planet and found that they have real food in the Republic – even the Republic ration bars – that's the day I threw in my lot with the Republic Army and never looked back."

"It...certainly was a benefit, sir."

I had this sudden strong desire to trip that shy play of expression around her mouth and eyes into a real laugh. But I didn't have any idea how to do that. So I kept rambling instead. "So the food and the sleep schedule are big pluses, but – at least for me – the jump to the Republic Army involved a hell of a lot more paperwork than I was used to." I waved the datapad.

"We have a very good system here, but it can be quite convoluted."

"I didn't think that bothered you."

"Just because I can navigate it doesn't mean it came easily."

"And I guess you had to cram it in next to all the Imp rulebooks you already knew."

"I think," she said carefully, "the previous practice in memorization helped."

"It's useful having both tactical manuals, at least. I've noticed that sometimes, rarely, when we're out there and things go off plan I'll slide into an Imp maneuver, one of the things I learned from fighting and copying the best my people saw in the field years ago. And you pick up right away. Jorgan's studied those tactics, but you *know* 'em. That helps."

"They do seem to come readily to you."

My anger at that claim was distant and fuzzy. "Studying and copying Imps was how I got most of my training. Robbing Imps was how I got most of my supplies and gear. All to point right back at them. In some ways the Empire made me the soldier I was when I signed on for Republic basic training four years ago. Not a day goes by I don't curse them for doing it, but...that's how it ended up." I frowned. "Sorry. I'm not directing this at you. It's just, that's how I came across the Imperial tricks I know."

She nodded solemnly. "I've been asked on more than one occasion," she said slowly, "to give a superior a full briefing on the tactics, the hand signals and other tells that Imperial squad leaders give. And a thousand other things. Sometimes it seems I'm expected to teach the whole field manual. It's been something of a relief not to have to be that kind of resource here."

"No. I already know more than enough." My head was starting to gently spin; I lay down and looked back over at Dorne. "Whatever I learned, things are better here."

"They are," she agreed warmly.

"You're all right, Dorne. You're not like any of them I ever met." For one thing, she didn't shoot at me, even when I probably deserved it; for another, she appeared to have a conscience. "And Jorgan and Forex keep up with the Imp-Pub two-step pretty well."

"Forex I expect; he's programmed for anything. I've been very impressed with Sergeant Jorgan's performance given our occasionally unorthodox or at least non-Republic-approved tactics. May I ask how long you worked with him prior to my arrival?"

"Six weeks, give or take."

She raised her eyebrows again. "You seem to coordinate very closely for such a short acquaintance."

"Eh, I'm used to having mouthy brothers. My professional brother-in-arms. We get along." And then I delivered the absolute finest nonsensical overreach my brain has ever handed to me while under the influence of anything. "I've never had a sister, though. I wonder how that works?"

She looked surprised, incredulous, possibly halfway alarmed, but after a moment this shy sweet smile started warming away the edges of her doubt. It was something...something genuine, that's all.

And that's when I fell asleep.

\*

I was sort of hoping Dorne would be gone forever when I got up that morning, but no, she was in the mess for breakfast as usual.

"Look, Sergeant," I told her by way of greeting. "I apologize if I was out of line last night. I was...a little out of it."

"It's all right, sir. Given the combination of injections you gave yourself I'm not surprised you were off balance. I am somewhat surprised you are still breathing."

"I told you, I've done it before. Let's not go over it. I just, I really didn't mean to—"

"You didn't, sir."

"Right. Good." I still felt vaguely like I owed her something. "I'm not saying you're not all right."

"Of course not," she agreed anxiously.

"I just, obviously," and here I was stumbling all over the place and needed something to decide on. Maybe something that made me stop feeling like an absolute liar for what loopy-me had said. "Obviously, as part of the squad like we talked about...would you be up for dinner tonight with the rest of us down at the cantina?"

"Oh," she squeaked. "I—I'm afraid I'll be busy, sir. Plenty of reading to keep up with."

"Okay. Just thought I'd ask." My feet finally agreed to participate in the retreat my brain was yelling for.



Jorgan pushed away from the wall outside and fell in step with me. "That," he said, "was the single most interesting exchange I've heard all week. 'Last night'?"

"Quiet, you," I said. "I had some adventures in tranquilizers, that's all."

"Oh, she finally caught you at it? It's a stupid way to die, but I guess you'll die well-rested."

"I'm not going to die. Not like that, anyway."

"In fact you're healthy enough to ask her out to dinner?"

I continued toward my quarters. "Don't even start. It's with the squad. Like you insisted."

"What the hell happened last night?"

"We talked about you, smartass." It was true, too.

Jorgan squinted at me for a while. "I did not expect the desert to get to you this fast," he said at last.

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm delicate like that. Now excuse me while I go curl up and die." I made to shut him out of my room.

"Uh, sir? We have a work day first."

"Dammit!" He was right, of course. And I was badly off balance. Again. "This is her fault."

"And I see we're already past the apology part of the Dorne cycle."

"Let's just go find something to shoot."

## **5. PARTIAL CANON: PUNISHMENT**

We breached the Imperial bunker buried under the Dune Sea. Once inside we found Fuse's jail cell before we found the command center. Lucky Fuse.

The pale kid was the only prisoner in the block, the only Zabrak in the base, the only Havoc failure on the planet. He looked even scrawnier in person than on holo. "Lieutenant," he said anxiously when he saw us coming. "You made it just in time – Colonel Gorik called for a full-scale evacuation. He's already at the hangar in the back of the base overseeing the evacuation – and he has my bomb designs with him. Please, you have to stop him."

Couldn't let that one get away. "I will," I said shortly.

The floor rumbled. Red lights started flashing and a voice came from every loudspeaker at once: "Warning. Warning. Self-destruct sequence initialized. All personnel evacuate to the hangar area immediately. This is not a drill."

I looked around. "They rigged the whole base to blow?"

"A research base with the kind of secrets they're developing? They would, sir," said Fuse.

"Great." Time to move. I took a look at the control panel for the forcefield that sealed Fuse's cell. Then I took a look at Fuse. "Have fun dying for your Empire." I turned away.

\*

We cleaned up Gorik and every other Imperial who tried to escape the building before we took the shuttle from their hangar and got out ahead of the blast. We landed well outside Anchorhead and trudged in on foot.

Jorgan followed me to the armory. "Sir," he said.

"Not discussing this," I said.

"It's done, sir. I know that."

I unclasped my outer armor and started tending to it. "Two hundred forty-seven civilians dead from his testing in Anchorhead. A hundred and fifty of them women and children. I don't know what the fuck part of that surprised him when he signed on with those people and I don't care."

"Still," said Jorgan. "You remember what his old commander said on Coruscant? About Ando Prime?"

"Sure. He said Havoc Squad was left out to dry when some politicians decided to cut their losses on an op gone wrong. That's no excuse for defecting."

"Not for defecting, no. I've been thinking, though. What do you do? Call comes down, from politics or crooked leadership, takes out some of your own or leaves them hanging...what would you do?"

The armor in my hands slipped; I fumbled to catch and hold on. "I don't know."

\*

We cleaned up the rest of Havoc Squad. After that the weeks of leave flew by. Good to see the old gang back home, good to see some of the old guard from their Army assignments. I even found myself kind of happy at the thought of going back to meet up with Jorgan, Dorne, and Forex again. Surprising thought, that, but I guess I had already gotten used to having them there. Even Dorne, somehow or other. We rendezvoused back on Coruscant one afternoon and got our stuff stowed on the ship. I was whistling on and off, thinking about nothing in particular, when I left my quarters.

I quit it when I noticed Jorgan and Dorne in the holo room. Jorgan stood there looking at me funny for a few seconds.

"What?" I said.

"It's nothing, sir." Jorgan made to turn away.

"It was a very disturbing nothing, by the look of it."

"You're, uh. You're smiling, sir."

"So? I can do that."

"You don't, Savins."

"Sure I do."

"Your facial expressions for as long as I've known you have pretty much been limited to grim and brooding."

"And angry," Dorne pointed out, and immediately looked surprised and somewhat alarmed that she had said it out loud.

Jorgan nodded. "Yeah, angry. And solemn." He looked to Dorne for confirmation.

She nodded a tiny bit. "And glum," she added.

"And irritated."

"And dour."

"And pensive, at times," continued Jorgan.

"And melancholy." Dorne squirmed a little. "Sir."

"And morose."

"You also appear downright despondent at times, sir!" announced M1-4X from the other room.

"Forex!" I yelled. "You stay out of this!"

"Right now for instance," Jorgan said, clearly enjoying every minute of this, "you're right on the indignant with a lingering touch of brooding."

"I can smile, you know," I said peevishly. "When I'm happy."

"If you say so, sir."

"And I was happy to tie up that way less than cheerful mission, and even happier to get some leave after. Hell, I'm even kind of happy to have you people back, or at least I was until you started talking."

"I, too, am delighted to see Havoc Squad reunited for its noble mission, sir!" yelled M1-4X.

"You people. Look, before you started in on me I was going to say I'm hitting the cantina for dinner before we go. You in?"

Jorgan nodded. "I could do that." He looked over. "What about you, Dorne?"

"Oh, no. I need to get the ship in order."

I crossed my arms. No way was she getting off that easy after a stunt like that. "Dorne, if you have the spare time to harass me you have the spare time to go for dinner with the squad after."

She looked at me. She looked at Jorgan. She smiled this tiny shy smile. "Very well, sir," she said. "I'll just be a moment getting ready."

I turned my glare to Jorgan the second she left. "You've got her mouthing off at me. How the hell did you do that?"

"I'm as surprised as you are, Savins. I'm sure she'll be back to her paper-pushing self in no time."

"We're on duty tomorrow," I grumbled, "and things'd better be back to normal."

"That's one thing we don't compromise on. I think we're all ready to get back to work."

"Yeah." We waited for a few seconds more; Dorne was still getting ready. "And I do too smile."

Jorgan sank back into that cool professionalism that he could pour all kinds of knowing malice into when he wanted. "Yes, sir," he disagreed.

\*

Since we came back from leave I'd taken to sitting down with Dorne once a week to clear paperwork; it went faster when we just sat in the same room and got all the consulting done at once. I wouldn't call it the most intimate of settings, but it the habit got to be sort of pleasant: her and me and the job, setting things in order.

So we were leaning over the table nitpicking some form or other so Command wouldn't find anything to nitpick for us. She moved a little to do something or other and, of all the ridiculous things for me to notice...of all the ridiculous things to notice for the first time...a lock of her hair fell loose from her regular ironclad bun. True gold, with a little curl at the end from where it had been tied. You can forget you're working with a woman if you try hard enough – it's easy, even, if you hate her – but every now and then the oddest thing will call your attention where you never meant it to go.

"Sir?"

I focused back on her big green eyes. You'd never think someone like that would have such vivid color about her. "Sorry," I said. "What were you saying?"

She frowned. "If you're tired we can set this aside and finish filing in the morning."

"No, it's nothing." She looked skeptical. I gestured at my own face to indicate her loose hair. "That's a nice look for you," I explained. Stupid. "Sorry, I don't mean anything by that. Maybe I am getting tired." Out of line, Savins. "Forget it."



Something of a smile passed across her face. "Already forgotten, sir," she said, in a voice that suggested anything but.

## **6. TREASON**

We were on Nar Shaddaa for resupply; I think both Dorne and I were cheerful when we ran into each other in the mess the next morning. She headed out planetside to pick things up after while I stayed on the ship to help Jorgan run maintenance on the armory.

A little while later we got an incoming holo: secure line from a familiar frequency. I answered to find none other than Jonas Balkar, the only SIS agent I've worked with who was more competent than he looked.

He looked strained when he smiled greeting. "Captain. Any time Havoc Squad comes through town I know it's going to be an interesting time."

"Someone has to keep you people on your toes. What can I do for you, Balkar?"

"Well." His smile went away entirely. "I'd better hand this over to our guest." He stepped aside but stayed in view as the image expanded to include a light-haired, rather grim-looking officer.

He glowered down at me. "Captain Savins. I'm Captain Raznic, Personnel Division. Is Sergeant Dorne available?"

"No, sir. She's out for supplies, I can call her in if you need to."

"Oh, I'm interested in hearing her explanation. But first things first."

Trouble? "I'm not sure I follow, sir."

Raznic threw a quick look Balkar's way, then continued. "Captain, we have reason to believe that Sergeant Dorne has been corresponding with representatives of the Imperial Army. I don't like to jump to conclusions but the evidence is pretty damning: she's turned informant."

"That can't be right. If she were up to anything I'd know." I'd been watching her closely enough. And, honestly, in these last weeks I was starting to think I needn't have worried. Dorne was as straight-shooting as they come.

Raznic shook his head gravely. "Jonas. Show him?" He gestured and suddenly the image of the agent and the officer vanished, replaced by two different people: Dorne and a boyish-looking guy in an Imperial uniform.

"Sergeant," the Imperial said warmly. "Or should I say Lieutenant?"

"Do try to remember that 'Sergeant' is the only rank I officially hold so long as this assignment lasts."

"Sergeant it is. I hope you're enjoying that side of the fence."

"Even if it's not Dromund Kaas there are great opportunities here. But let's not waste time, sir; the Captain is always watching." A cold knife slid into my gut at that.

"Of course. Report, Sergeant."

\*

Elara Dorne walked down the broad corridors of the Upper Industrial District with a quick step. There were some specialized stores off the beaten path here – reputable, with approved supplies, just better variety and better quality than could be found in most places outside the Core Worlds.

Someone waving caught her eye. A boyish-looking fellow in a Republic uniform approached and fell in step with her. "Lieutenant Lovissian, Sergeant, Personnel Division. Walk with me."

She looked askance at him. "Is...there a problem, sir?"

"Not as such. I know things have been hectic, I thought we could cover the checkin while you're here instead of trying to coordinate holocalls while you're on restricted missions."

"Sir, with all respect, I would have expected to receive this notification by way of my direct superior."

"The captain was...uncooperative when we tried to talk to him. I think it's an understandable if misguided effort to protect you; whatever the case, Captain Kalor assured me that you would help us clear this up with no trouble." He

fumbled in his pocket for a moment, grinned apologetically as he folded and flipped through a wallet to finally produce a Republic Army identicard.

Dorne nodded hesitantly. "I always make an effort to see that things run smoothly, lieutenant."

"Yes, I..." Lovissian trailed off. He was looking down the street; a large knot of armed men had just come around the corner. "Huh. Some neighborhood. Let's take the next cross street, Sergeant, I don't like the look of that."

"Agreed, sir."

They didn't make it that far before the lead thug raised his rifle.

Lovissian dove for the nearest door and shoved it open. "In," he barked, readying a pistol to cover her retreat while blaster fire started lighting up the street.

\*

Dorne was always crisp and efficient in her reports. She made only the occasional policy statement in this one, every line pro-Empire. It was exactly the kind of thing I had always been afraid of but had never caught her at. The only surprising thing was how much I didn't want to believe what I was seeing.

I stared, stunned, well after the holorecording had ended and the image returned to Raznic. The man started yammering and it took me some effort to listen. "She's

due to meet with an Imperial officer this afternoon, Lieutenant Lovissian, in the upper industrial district. We have the SIS due to intercept and cut off any intelligence transfer that may take place."

"How long?" I asked hoarsely. "How long has she been reporting?" How long had I missed this?

"The earliest evidence we've located says three months. Since shortly after she joined Havoc Squad. It may have been going on longer."

"I had no idea. I was watching for this and I had no idea." And there I'd been getting friendly the entire time, or at least coming around to the notion.

"Captain, this isn't your fault. She fooled all of us."

She couldn't have. But if...if she had there would be a reckoning for it. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Just sit tight," said Balkar. "Havoc Squad storming in to the rendezvous would only complicate things. I'll contact you as soon as my people check in." He looked to Raznic.

Raznic paused a second before speaking. "I'm sorry, captain."

"Yeah," I said slowly. "So am I."

"I'm sending you our most recent picture of Lovissian. We anticipate that the SIS team will be able to stop him, but if he tries contacting you in any way, keep in mind that he is extremely dangerous. With any luck we'll nab them both today and you'll be free to move on. Raznic out."

At some point Jorgan had entered. He crossed his arms and looked from me to the now-inactive holo and back. "I don't believe it," he said in a tight low voice.

"I...no. We'll call her, there's got to be an explanation." If there wasn't there would be hell to pay, and I didn't want the woman I knew to have to pay it.

It was right then that an incoming holo from her saved us the trouble of calling. I felt a little shiver of relief; if she were up to anything she wouldn't come to us.

She was tensed in combat-ready position. She talked fast. "Sir. I'm in the Upper Industrial District. There's been an attack, I think from the Exchange. I'm currently barricaded in an abandoned house but I'm not sure how long the barricade will hold. Requesting immediate assistance."

That was far from the innocuous check-in I was hoping for. Upper Industrial District. Did she have a name, too? "Who exactly were you meeting with, Sergeant?"

She didn't deny there had been a meeting. "Lieutenant Lovissian, Personnel Division. He's dead now, sir. I'm trapped here."

"Any personnel discussion you were having should've gone through me." I had gone out of my way for her on that front, rather than letting Personnel Division corner her with borderline harassment tracking. Saying she was bypassing me now was a weak excuse if I'd ever heard one.

"Sir, this isn't the time. We can discuss it after I've gotten out."

"Right." Why call me for an extraction? Was I that easy to jerk around? Stupid of me to think she would've been calling just to chat. I had evidence of what was going on, and now I knew what a lie she was carrying out. "Huh," I said, finally giving my uncertain anger permission to rise. "Exchange, is it?"

"I think so, sir. I need your immediate support."

Jorgan spoke up. "Sir, the Exchange has been all over that district lately. We can sort everything else out later, for now we need to get her out of there."

I gestured for him to be quiet. "What would they be after with you, Sergeant? Something you were carrying?"

"I don't know, sir."

It occurred to me that the SIS might not have backup for unexpected guests. I didn't want to get nearer, not really, but..."Estimated force?"

"A dozen, sir, armed with heavy blaster rifles and at least some grenades."



Why such a heavy patrol? There must've been something they wanted. I had a good idea what. And the idea of her walking off with intelligence on our people made me furious. One thing to check first. "All right. There's something I need you to do."

"Name it, but hurry."

"Show me Lovissian's face. Scan his ID, drag him over, whatever it takes."

She frowned, but she switched a setting on her holo and it zoomed out a little. She bent over a bloodied figure and pulled a wallet from his pocket. She flipped part way through, froze. Slowly went on, looking scared.

"Problem, Sergeant?"

"I'll report fully when I get back, sir," she said. "He's..." Her voice dropped. "He seems to be carrying Imperial documents."

And she was going to say this was a surprise. "Then scan the Imperial ID, Sergeant. Show me what he looks like."

But I already knew. When she swiped the identicard, the face that came up was the Imp I had been told to expect.

Dammit. And I had had no clue. "Want to tell me again you don't know why the Exchange is after your little meeting?"

"Sir, I didn't know. This was an unplanned conversation, I had no idea—"

Her composure was crumbling. With good reason. "Did you really think you could lie to me, Sergeant?"

"I never did, sir. I'll answer any questions you have, but I have to get out of here first."

Jorgan waved a little to catch my attention. "We're ready to go when you are," he said.

"We're not going anywhere." It made me sick to say it, but not as sick as I felt about seeing her again face to face. Seeing what she was up to with my own eyes, and seeing her deny it some more.

There was panic in Dorne's voice. "I don't have much time, sir. I can hold out for a few more minutes but I can't drive them off on my own."

"You went in of your own accord, Sergeant. You figure it out."

I heard a sharp little intake of breath. "Sir?"

"Sir?" echoed Jorgan.

"We're not going, Jorgan. She's meeting with the enemy, she can clean it up herself."

"We don't have the whole story here, Savins, the least we can do is—"

"I said no. That's final."

Jorgan's yellow eyes flared and his voice was nothing but gravel. "You're talking about letting Dorne die."

For what she was doing? For the Imp she was shut in with now, for the fact that all my suspicion still hadn't caught what mattered, and for the fact that I'd started letting my guard down? "Yes. I am."

A loud impact sounded over the holo. Dorne cast a look elsewhere before turning her eyes to me. "Vierce, please."

The way her accent twisted my name raised the roaring in my ears even further. "You've got no right, Imperial. No right."

A shattering sound burst from over the line and suddenly Dorne had her blaster out and was looking up and past her own holo, determination shut tight over anything else she might have been feeling. I wondered if she had managed to

transmit her report to her superiors. I hoped it died with the Imps in that room. I hoped the Imps in that room died.

The holo cut out. It felt like something of me got caught on the other side.

.....

The light-haired man in the Republic uniform helped Jonas Balkar finish his report, then headed out to board an unmarked silver ship in a private hangar. He made his usual check of the ship, then placed a secure holocall.

The dark-eyed woman called Watcher Two answered. "Cipher, good to see you. You're right on time."

"And completely successful. Though I'm afraid we did lose Agent Lovissian in the process."

"We all knew the risks. The operation would still have worked if he had managed to survive, but you know the impact will be all the greater because a real Imperial agent was found on the scene." She looked off to one side. "I'm sorry Keeper isn't here; he's running late. Meetings with the higher-ups. All indications are that he's getting promoted in the very near future. I think this operation qualifies as a capstone for him."

"The promotion's well deserved. Orchestrating the second breaking of Havoc Squad was quite the feat." Cipher Nine half smiled. "And helping to execute it has been quite the pleasure."

"Ah, here he is. Patching him through." Her image vanished, replaced by the thin balding man known as Keeper.

"Agent. I'm told you have good news. Report. What's your status?"

"Our target Sergeant Dorne, by all appearances, made an effort to deal information to the Empire. Falsified recordings substantiate the claim. She and her Imperial contact were killed by an Exchange team seeking to intercept an intelligence transfer based on an anonymous tip. Embarrassingly enough, one or two journalists in the area captured the event before the Republic could hush it up. Quite apart from the Republic's loss of a very important soldier, I anticipate a number of secondary effects.

"The Republic has lost face on Nar Shaddaa. Dorne's brother, also a defector, though he is frankly of questionable value, may yet make something of himself; this event – particularly if our story about her goes on record as truth – may sway him back to our side, and he'll have some useful information just by virtue of having served with the Republic. Meanwhile my account as a Personnel Division employee is already receiving instructions to redouble security. We have good agents firmly embedded in the Republic Army; after this disaster it's going to be that much harder for real defectors to get in the door."

"A triumph. And the crusader?"

"If they remove Garza's hound for his negligence they might find a suitable replacement to command the remnants of the squad in eight to ten weeks. If they opt for an unsuitable replacement right away, their effectiveness will plummet. If the hound stays in place...given our profiles for both him and the other crew members, the loss in morale will have repercussions far, far greater than the mere

loss of manpower." Cipher Nine smiled warmly. "Havoc Squad never recovered from Tavus's defection. And if they keep appointing people this volatile, they never will."

.....

## **7. QUERYING THE AFTERMATH**

Balkar called in confirmation not two hours later. Dorne down. Imp down. Exchange heavies taken before they could walk off with a Republic-marked datacard that was going in for analysis now.

I couldn't look him in the eye. Or Jorgan, or anyone. I made it as far as the door to her quarters with this stupid automatic thought that I should pack things up. I got as far as the shelf just inside the door, with a neat little box full of hairpins, the kind she must've used a million of every day to keep herself together.

No way could I do anything here. I took a pin for no reason I could really explain and went to my own quarters. I locked the door, sat down. Turned the hairpin over in my hands. And over, and over.

I should have felt better, somehow. I saw it coming, didn't I? More or less? Before I got careless? I knew she was trouble. Just, somewhere along the way, I stopped wanting her to be. I thought things were finally going all right. For a few hours, I'd thought things might have changed even more than that. For a few hours I thought she was beautiful.

My vision was blurring. I gritted my teeth to keep myself from gagging and I snapped the hairpin in half. I thought a lot of things. I was wrong.

I was wrong.

\*

I dreamed that night. Of course I dreamed. Loud, vivid. My father's murder. Other places, other deaths. It went on and on and on, and every single impact, every single time, I wasn't fast or smart enough to stop it.

\*

General Garza called at 0600 sharp and she didn't look happy. "Captain. We need to talk."

"Already en route to Coruscant, General." I had set course about ten minutes ago.

"Good idea. See me in my office as soon as you arrive."

\*

Jorgan, M1-4X, Vik and myself reported as ordered. I didn't feel quite right having Vik there. He was new here; anything he heard was going to be...it was going to muddle things.

Either that or he was going to be the only one of us who had unmixed memories of what she was.

Garza waved dismissal to the sergeant who had seen us in. The second the door was shut her voice sounded like a whip crack. "There are politicians banging down my door after the reports from Nar Shaddaa. Tell me everything."

\*

Garza was pacing. She had done it since about thirty seconds into my account of yesterday's events.

"And you never suspected?" she said coldly.

"I suspected everything. But I never saw an ounce of evidence for it."

She shook her head and clasped her hands behind her back. "We won't have time to clear this up with our own inquiry; there are Senators already on my back for a hearing. So you're going to give it to them. They're calling in the SIS themselves; if Balkar and this Raznic stick to their story there's nothing we can do. Tell the



Senate what you told me. Do not improvise. There is no way to make this look good; don't try, it'll only make things worse. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Come with me." She started stalking toward the door.

"Wait, now?"

"Certain parties jumped on this," she said grimly. "They're looking forward to tearing apart a second defection from Havoc Squad." It took my full regular stride to keep up with her. "Frankly I don't know whether we can keep the squad operating."

My heart froze up at that. I had worked with Dorne. I had helped her. And if her selling us out destroyed the squad as well as herself...

Was it my fault she'd done it? If I'd treated her decently to start with would it have been different? Or would that just have meant she got that much more advantage out of me while she was selling us out? She did respond sweetly to kindness. I thought she did, the few times I offered it. Maybe that didn't mean anything. I didn't know.

The hearing room was crowded with faces, most of them unfriendly. We had a good crowd for today's political blood sport. I couldn't blame them. Another active Imp in Havoc Squad was pretty much a worst-case scenario for everyone involved.

So the circus started.

"This hearing is called to order," said the sour-faced Chagrian in charge, "to inquire into the allegations that Sergeant Elara Dorne was caught in the act of passing secrets to an Imperial officer on Nar Shaddaa." He looked around the room.

So did I. Apart from Havoc Squad and the senators I saw Jonas Balkar and the Mirialan Captain Kalor of Personnel Division, the one who had handled monitoring Dorne's activities, or trying to.

"Since Havoc Squad submitted no reports of suspicious activity throughout Sergeant Dorne's six months in operation, we'll first turn to the evidence

submitted to the Strategic Information Service by Captain Raznic, who undertook an investigation on behalf of Personnel Division. Unfortunately, Captain Raznic was unable to join us today."

I found myself looking at Balkar, who frowned back at me. Raznic had a lot to answer for. In the end I should probably thank him, but I wanted to see him face to face first.

Senator Sourface continued. "I've asked Jonas Balkar, who received Raznic's full briefing and assisted him in executing operations on Nar Shaddaa, to take the stand today."

So Balkar gave the story of how Raznic came to him with these accusations. He brought up the recording of Dorne's report to the Imp Lieutenant Lovissian. It wasn't any easier to watch the second time around. The way she said 'Captain'...she despised me. She had every reason to, and yet for all I did I still hadn't managed to stop her. I shouldn't even care that she hated me, she was a traitor, but it still stung.

The Senators whispered a lot to each other as the conversation played. I couldn't blame them. Balkar spoke up as soon as the playback ended. "Raznic indicates that our analysts in the SIS did have the chance to go over this recording with a fine-toothed comb. It's genuine."

"So there's no question that this espionage occurred," pronounced Senator Sourface. "The only matters of interest now are the extent of the damage, and the question of why Havoc Squad's commander never detected her activities. Captain Vierce Savins, please come to the front."

I took the seat that Balkar had paced in front of throughout his testimony. I gave my account of yesterday. Then I gave my account of how I hadn't seen anything, anything at all, her entire time with the squad. I could feel my face burning the whole time. This was all I had to contribute: ignorance.

I tied it up with a summary: "I didn't see anything. She ran it all by the numbers, perfectly. Just about the most dramatic thing she did was avoid me on the ship when she could. I guess that ended up giving her plenty of alone time, but I was watching comm logs. I never caught a report."

"That much," said Sourface, "is abundantly clear. Dismissed. Lieutenant Jorgan?"

Jorgan's eyes were blazing as he came up to replace me in the witness's seat. He didn't give them a chance to talk. "I have two things to say, Senators. The first is that whatever evidence may have materialized, I can tell you Sergeant Dorne contributed as a loyal and reliable member of the squad. And the second is that I have trouble believing she could so much as blink in a nonstandard way without Captain Savins reporting it. I believe we're all aware of his record against Imperials."

"He was obviously making an exception," drawled someone in the front row.

"I don't think so, Senator. It was Savins who intercepted the one confirmed Imperial transmission that ever passed through Havoc Squad's ship, the call for help that her brother Aleksei Dorne sent the last time we were stationed on Nar Shaddaa."

"Additional correspondence with Imperials on Nar Shaddaa?" Sourface said unpleasantly.

Jorgan clenched his jaw. "Yes, sir. Savins discussed it with the sergeant, personally escorted her to the rendezvous, and ended up bringing a whole squad of defectors in."

"Defectors of, I would say, highly questionable value. We should detain Aleksei and his squad at the earliest opportunity pending questioning." Sourface turned to me. "Did you run this by Personnel Division or any of your superiors before rendezvousing with these enemy forces?"

"No, Senator. There wasn't time." I was just doing what I thought was right. Plus Kirsk had been set on it, and I never knew Kirsk to read someone wrong. And Dorne had been so damn happy. Maybe I thought it was good to do something fair for her. Well, I guess now I knew what thanks I got for that.

"In your personal judgment," pressed Sourface.

"That's correct," I ground out.

"Lieutenant Jorgan, can you offer us any insight into the relationship between Captain Savins and Sergeant Dorne?"

"He was her CO." Jorgan crossed his arms and looked stubborn.

"And did he ever show an inclination toward favoritism?"

Jorgan shot a look at me while he thought about that one. I wondered whether he was just trying to tone down the phrasing on the 'no' there. "He did not, Senator. He was always careful to maintain professionalism; if anything he was harder on her than on the rest of us."

"I see. And did you ever observe Sergeant Dorne making efforts to...curry favor...with her commanding officer?"

Jorgan shot to his feet. "Absolutely not. She was a professional. So's Savins. I've got nothing else to say."

"Calm yourself, Lieutenant Jorgan, you're dismissed. Captain Kalor?"

The balding Mirialan came to the front while Jorgan sat by me and glared at the far wall.

Sourface was still going. "Kalor, you've supervised Elara Dorne's case file ever since she applied to serve in the Republic Army, is that correct?"

"Yes, Senator." Kalor looked troubled but determined. I didn't like the look.

"And she was always cooperative in reporting her activities to you, is that correct?"

"Until she joined Havoc Squad, yes."

"Ah," Sourface said smugly. "Please note, gentlemen, that that is exactly when our investigative reports first indicate her suspect activity. Now, Kalor, can you elaborate?"

"Not much to say. The first check-in after she joined she stonewalled me completely. Said that all squad activities were classified top secret and she could no longer report."

"I see. Was Captain Savins of any help in this?"

"Not, at, all," Kalor said. "He stepped in to vouch for her 'good behavior' and declined to elaborate on anything, or to allow me to question her further."

That was Sourface's cue to turn to me again. "And once again you seem to be protecting Sergeant Dorne's activities, Captain, activities that you maintain you knew nothing about."

"Classified mission data is classified mission data, sir. I was doing what was right for the squad." I rubbed at my neck a bit, not that that did any good. "I only did what was needed to keep our operations' integrity intact. Now it looks like she was taking full advantage of that to do what she wanted." She had been so damned surprised, so grateful, when I stepped in to tell Kalor the rules were on her side. Big damn hero me, doing what was best for the squad even if it meant taking a little heat for the Imp. Genius.

"Thank you, Captain Savins," said the softspoken Mirialan woman sitting by Sourface. "You and your men are dismissed."

As I walked out the senators chattered among themselves. This could lead exactly nowhere good; at best I would hang instead of the whole of Havoc Squad. Did they really have to bring up every stupid little thing I'd done in my stupid efforts to make up for wanting to knock Dorne's Imperial mouth shut the day she came on board?

We rounded a corner into a relatively quiet hallway and I stopped. Jorgan did, too. Vik gave me a curious look; I waved him on. "I'll meet you back at the ship," I told him and Forex. "Right," said Vik, and went on his way.

"How did that come out making me look like an Imp sympathizer?" I asked the ceiling.

"The questions were rigged," said Jorgan

"Sounded straightforward enough to me. I just can't believe I didn't see any of this."

"I'm not convinced there was anything there to see."

"Were you at the same meeting I was at?"

"I heard one piece of hard evidence. Hard to ignore. It still stinks."

I sort of wanted to agree with him. "Look, maybe part of me wants to believe she's innocent, but that's not how things are adding up."

Jorgan started. "You do?"

Just then Balkar came hurrying around the corner. He gave us both a strained smile. "Well, that could've gone better," he said.

"The Senate building burning down mid-hearing would've counted as going better," I growled.

"You've got Garza on your side, big guy. If anyone can keep your record intact it'll be her."

It took me a second to fully process that. "My record's not the point. Either I really did fail, harder than anyone can excuse, or...well, that's the only thing that makes sense."

"That or there was a setup," said Jorgan. "Until someone talks to Raznic I won't rule out the possibility."

Hearing him say it loosened something up in my chest. It was a possibility that meant she wasn't a fake, toward the end, when I thought things were going well. Meant she wasn't a fake at all. Too bad that idea was too good to be true. "The recording looked ironclad," I said.

Balkar nodded, looking sympathetic. "Like I said, SIS analysts went over it. It's the real deal."

"Which analysts?" insisted Jorgan. "Have we talked to them?"

"I can't exactly show soldiers into their office for questioning. It was handled through a different department, but I know those guys, they're reliable."

"Run it by someone reliable that you can talk to, face to face, to confirm."

Balkar looked at Jorgan. Then at me, then at Jorgan. "There's going to be pushback, Aric."

"You don't have to put your neck on the line for this," I said. "But can you get me a copy of the recording? I know a guy. If he finds something maybe that's enough to bring back to you for official analysis."

"To everyone in that room this case is open and shut. You both really think it's worth checking?"

"Yes," I said in unison with Jorgan.

"Then I'll get it." Balkar took a couple of steps back. "I'd better go, but I'll look into our earlier analysis report and I'll send what I can ASAP. I hope this helps clear your name, Vierce."

"My name'll look after itself. This is about Dorne's." I turned away. "All right, Jorgan. Let's go home. We'll see if we have a job in the morning."

## **8. THE SIDE JOB**

Nightmares. I woke up early and forced myself to move. Dorne used to keep some kind of sedative formula around for the nights I couldn't sleep, or could sleep but kept on yelling. She cooked something up after she found out what I was using in combination with not-especially-precisely-dosed alcohol to knock myself out most of the time, and she just quietly made sure the nonlethal stuff was around after that.

Yeah. She had everything perfectly in place. I guess she always did. So why did it feel like something didn't add up?

That was stupid. It was me feeling...feeling the wrong way. I hauled on out to pick up the last of the supplies we needed planetside.

When I got back I had a message telling me call General Garza immediately. My stomach knotted up; this was going to tell me exactly what I would be doing in the immediate future.

She looked just about as sour as ever. "Captain. Havoc Squad is still cleared for its operation against the Gauntlet superweapon. The bad news is that that was far from a given. I need you on your best behavior, getting results. The Senate inquiry panel will be 'reevaluating' Havoc Squad's status when this is done, but for now it agrees that you're needed in the field." She went from grim to almost angry. "Do not give them another reason to doubt that."

Now that wasn't fair. "I never gave them a reason in the first place, sir."

"A reason happened," she said sharply. "We can't afford anything that looks like another mistake."

"Did they come up with a conclusion, sir?" More importantly, was she satisfied with it? Garza had a will like durasteel and more than enough power to put behind it if she had a mind to. If there were any explanation other than me being blind – incredibly, stupidly, infuriatingly blind – and Dorne's activities being invisible, Garza would make sure to make the Senate listen.

"There's a clear explanation, captain. Whether I was mistaken in my initial evaluation of Sergeant Dorne or not, it would take quite a lot to overturn their



decision. Starting with a piece of actual evidence. For now we have to put that aside. You're needed on Quesh."

"Yes, sir."

\*

Quesh was a mess. My sole objective was to free up the Safecrackers, an elite unit trapped behind enemy lines. How anybody could make out lines in a yellow-smear swamp like Quesh I'll never know. At least on Kegled II or even Ord Mantell you could tell what you were fighting for.

Anyway, we needed the Safecrackers on our side to secure the Gauntlet vessel when the time came. What passed for the Republic base was under heavy pressure from the Imps when we showed up; a couple of days of chewing through everything they sent at us was something I was ready to handle. I wanted to break things.

We suffered for Dorne's absence. Forex stepped up to additional fire support amazingly, but our coordination was missing a piece. The newcomer Tanno Vik was...Vik. I don't even know where to start on him so I'll stick to the operational stuff. He had a criminal's smoothness – I'd worked with plenty of his type in the resistance – but he was only precise with the plan we laid out in advance. If the slightest thing went wrong he would start improvising things I'd have beaten him senseless for if we weren't busy fighting for our lives. I guess, in a way, getting privately mad at him was better than thinking about other things. But I missed having the extra someone who knew my signals almost before I gave them. I guess she always knew that would happen.

I hadn't realized she'd gotten that far under my skin.

Balkar contacted us while we were on Quesh. It was a secure line, I had Jorgan follow me into the barracks and took it on my personal holo.

The SIS agent put on a brave face. "Vierce. How are you liking the adrenal capital of the galaxy?"

"I'll give it 'exciting'," I said. "How's your peace and quiet?"

"I'll let you know after I find some. Strangely I haven't been able to get in touch with the exact SIS analyst who checked over our Captain Raznic's dirt. People in-house want this over: the Imperial did Imperial things, we got points for catching it." He shot a look at Jorgan. "Maybe it's true. But if you wanted a chance to look yourself, I can send you the recording that incriminated your sergeant. Keep it quiet, all right?"

"I can do that." It seemed nobody higher up wanted to hear it anyway. "Thanks. This means a lot."

"You did us a good turn on Nar Shaddaa. I'd like to return the favor. I hope you find what you're looking for, captain. Balkar out."

\*

That meant there was one more call I had to make before I returned to the field. My little brother wasn't one to dedicate himself to any one thing for long, but he had kept up with his slicing skills. He did it for the resistance back home and he freelanced nowadays. It was the way he had to put one over on the Imps when he got the chance; he was no fighter but that didn't mean he couldn't wreak havoc in his own way. He loved every minute of it.

For once he answered when I called him. For once he looked healthy, intact, and not tensed up to run from the trouble of the day. "Hey, Vierce," he said in his much-practiced cool-guy voice. "What's up?"

"What's up? I can't believe I got you on the first try, that's what."

"I made a New Year's resolution to be there for my family more. You are the lucky beneficiary."

I ran a quick mental check. "Uh, whose New Year?"

"Balmorra, blockhead, don't tell me you didn't notice while you were on planet. I would've dug up a date for you if you weren't so busy saving the Republic."

"Yeah, about that." Something stabbed hard at my chest and it took me a second to start talking again. "Would you be up for some recreational wrecking of Imp slicing?"

"For a friend in need? Always." He gave me his cockiest grin. "I assume you are in need."

Yeah. A lot. "I just thought you might enjoy this one. The twist is I'm not even sure the file was tampered with at all. That's what I need you to find out."

"Huh. Where did you even...you're supposed to be shooting people, Vierce. Do I even get to ask what you're doing with your soldier time?"

"You can ask," I said dryly. "Just take a look, would you?"

"Yeah, I've got time. As it happens there's not much more point running guns to Balmorra. The Imp governor and her whole regime is gone, the arms factories are back in the locals' hands...I'm in the market for a new lost cause. Can't think of a better one than you, big brother."

\*

It took Kirsk more than a day to call back. I never know what that means. Havoc Squad and the rest of the Republic forces had managed to break through the Imperial line, and we were camping in the noxious field only a couple of hours away from where the Safecrackers were holed up, when his holo did come through.

He looked as serious as I've ever seen him. "Hey, Vierce," he said in a strained voice. "Where's Miss Dorne?"

It took an effort to keep eye contact. "She's dead, Kirsk."

He passed a hand slowly over his face, top to bottom. "Died in custody?" he said weakly.

"No." I could see where he would guess that, but no, it didn't turn out that way. "Got caught out alone by a street gang. What did you find out?"

"I can't put this on holo. Where are you?"

"Don't leave me hanging. Can you tell me if it's good or bad?"

"By your lights? I don't know. Just tell me where I'm flying."

"I'm on Quesh for now, but I don't know when I'm getting called away."

"Okay." The bravado of his smile seemed more brittle than usual. "I don't know how it is I always end up in charge of this girl's correspondence, but...I'm on my way."

\*

That didn't exactly do wonders for my concentration when we made the final assault on the Safecrackers' position, but we got the unit out, and they and their leader Lieutenant Coria were appreciative. I sent them on their way back to base; the higher-ups would debrief them and make sure they were ready when the Gauntlet mission made its attack. Afterward I left the crew to rest at base while I took the shuttle back up to the orbital station.

Kirsk wasted no time after he arrived. He met me in my ship's airlock and blew right past to reach the door. "Hi," he said. "Not here."

He didn't go all business on me often. I followed him onto the ship. He paced to the far end of the holo room and ran his hands over hair, a nervous smoothing. "So what happened?" he said, his voice cracking.

"Is it real?"

"As a Devaronian's promise. Smooth, but it doesn't hold up." He turned around. "Where did you get this?"

"SIS," I said with what little of my brain could keep up with talking. I was part relieved and part stabbed through. She was in the clear after all. She was clear. Things...everything...serving with her, wasn't fake.

That meant instead of failing the Republic, I had failed her. One of my people. *Vierce, please.*

Kirsk was talking. "Sorry," I said. For a second it felt like that word summed everything up. "What?"

"The SIS handed you this? Did they have anything else?"

"The guy talking to them said they did. I wasn't around for the presentation."

"So how did it...her...happen?"

I went over it again. Reciting the words gave me something to do while the mix of shame and anger and...relief...ran through me. A lot of it gathered in my neck; I tried to pay it no mind.

I was never a leader until Havoc Squad. In the resistance I was young; my first four years with the Republic I was just a grunt. But I knew you look after your people. I always tried to, with Jorgan and Forex. I sometimes tried to with Dorne even if I wasn't kind about it. In the end I threw that away.

"We'll turn this in," Kirsk said when I was done. "They have to take it seriously."

"I don't even know why the SIS delayed on it. There's politics in this job, Kirsk." I made an effort to unclench my fists. "That won't stop me."

"Don't..." he took a sharp breath. "I'm sticking around for a while."

"You don't have to do that. Probably better if you don't."

He smiled weakly. "Mama's not around to keep you from suicide runs. Someone's gotta do it."

"I won't...if I were going to be that stupid I'd have done it already. Trust me, I was mad enough before you let me know." I could swear the scar on my face itched for a moment. "I'll do this right, I promise. I don't know how yet, but I'll do it right."

"Good. You get bent out of shape when you're wrong, you know. I'll hang around for a while, see what I can help with. I've got ways of bypassing politics."

"Yeah, I remember. So..." I didn't want to stop talking yet. I wasn't ready to be left thinking. *Vierce, please.* "Tell me about the recording."

"Amazing work, I'll say that. I couldn't reconstruct 'the original message', it's spliced together from scraps of at least six different conversations. Someone was watching her calls. She wasn't saying anything remotely anti-Republic in any of the originals. The editing was incredible."

I didn't like the tone of his voice. "There's nothing good to say about it."

"I...yeah. We better find that – Raznic? – and see where he got this, because it's well put together but an SIS slicer who gave it ten minutes should've seen it."

"Then I'll call my contact." I was thinking of my last words to her. You have no right, Imperial. Her last words: Vierce, please.

My answer had been no, and she had been innocent.

I walked past Kirsik and into the cargo bay where the punching bag was set up. "Vierce?" he called after me.

"I have to hit something."

I'd already done way too much nothing.

## **9. SUSPECT**

Jonas Balkar strolled into the side room of the Nar Shaddaa cantina and SIS front. Ardun Kothe, the Jedi turned SIS team leader, sat behind the desk, looking thoughtfully at a gleaming gem paperweight. He stood when Balkar came in. "Jonas. It's good to see you."

Balkar leaned across the desk to shake his hand. "Do you ever move? There's a lot more interesting cantinas than this, and I've got a room reserved for business in most of 'em."

"Well," said Kothe, smiling with a touch of wryness, "all my stuff is here." He sat down again, gesturing for Balkar to sit opposite him. "So. To what do I owe the pleasure of this...very much insisted upon...meeting?"

"Well," Balkar said brightly. "A funny thing happened on the way to Captain Savins' court-martial."

"Havoc Squad commander, isn't he? I wasn't aware he was getting one."

"He's not. General Garza managed to convince certain interested parties that the squad's current mission is too critical to disrupt just now. But like I said, some mighty funny things came up on the way."

"Jonas, I don't want to be inhospitable, but my time is limited, and..."

"A woman named Elara Dorne was named a traitor to the Republic based on evidence submitted by one Captain Raznic of Personnel Division. Do you know him?"

Kothe eyed him curiously. "No, I don't."

"Interesting guy. He's been in the service for a solid six years and remarkably few people have met him. But I had a chance to run his biometrics by certain special access databases – biometrics that had to be recovered from backup databanks, since a recent accident wiped out our primary source."

"I take it you found something with the recovered data?"

"In fact, I did. We've hired Raznic. The SIS, I mean. Slightly different face, nothing makeup can't account for. He's been freshly logged as a defector from Imperial Intelligence, new code name Legate."

Kothe's mouth went slack. "I see."

"Did you know he pulled off an extremely intricate – and successful, I might add – operation on Nar Shaddaa not three weeks ago?"

"He's pulled off a lot of successful operations if what little in the way of files we have on him are accurate. Nevertheless, he's come to our side."

"He doesn't seem to have slowed his activity down much before hopping the fence."

"Changes in performance draw attention, Jonas, you know that. He's functioning as a double agent now, he can't afford to slack off."

"Our double agents shouldn't be hitting us this hard. I wish you'd met the woman whose record he ruined, and whose death he arranged. She was a sweet girl. A fine soldier, too. Legate's Captain Raznic took her apart and very neatly arranged it for maximum impact on her squad's morale. Frankly, I couldn't have done it better myself." Balkar waited for a response and didn't get one. "I want to talk to him. I know some people who are more than a little interested in clearing Elara's name, and that takes information he has."

"I can't let you do that. Releasing that information would blow his cover."

"This is a cold customer, Ardun, and I don't doubt he's capable of worse. We have no way of knowing whether that 'worse' is going to be in our favor when it happens again."

"We've all done questionable things, Jonas. Maybe we could use a chance to set them right."

"He cut down a member of Havoc Squad. I'd feel safer if our repentant sinners were a little less good at their questionable things."

"I have good reason to trust him now."



"Can I at least talk to him? I won't make his activities public, but I still want to clear up that operation."

"He's out on assignment," Kothe said firmly.

Balkar made a frustrated cutting gesture. "Don't give me that. We're supposed to be on the same side, Ardun."

"We are. Trust me when I say I have Legate well in hand."

"I hope so. I know some good men who are looking for justice and aren't going to get it thanks to your amnesty program."

Ardun Kothe looked into the middle distance and emanated a pompous air of melancholy. "I think we all do."

This was going nowhere. Balkar wasn't sure how much harder he could push before he brought something irreversible on himself. Maybe he couldn't push at all.

But he could hand what he knew on to someone who could.

\*

I smelled something good from the mess once I was finished wrecking my hands. I bandaged my bleeding knuckles and headed in to see what was what.

What was what was Kirsk managing to scavenge stuff – I don't even know where he got it – to prep some kind of soup that was hearty enough to be worthwhile. "Serve yourself," he said as I entered. He was going through the cupboards. "Do you really have nothing better than this Telosian paint thinner to drink?"

"Jorgan's call, not mine," I said. We were both more beer people anyway; we didn't keep much in the way of spirits around, and even less after...after I stopped using it to sleep. I tried to shake the thought off. I helped myself to some of the soup; it really did smell almost good enough to counter the bitterness churning in

my stomach. Kirsk could be all right when it occurred to him to be. "Nice to have you around sometimes, you know that?"

"Glad to help. By the way, I should mention, if any Neimoidians happen to call, you don't know where I am and you haven't seen me for a long time."

I stopped with my spoon halfway to my mouth. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. I hate to bring it up, but, just so you know."

It was a tiny bit comforting to know that at least something in life went on. I ate in silence; Kirsk, after a little more grumbling about the available alcohol, settled across and down the table and let me alone. *Vierce, please*. I tried not to think.

Jorgan and Forex showed up not too long after. Forex yelled a cheerful greeting and returned to his usual haunt by the HoloNet feed in the briefing room. Jorgan slowed and came to the mess doorway when he saw Kirsk. "News?" said the Cathar.

"Evidence was faked," I said. "We're working tomorrow."

I've never seen him scowl so hard in my life. "I see, sir. We'll get that info where it needs to go."

"I can explain details later," said Kirsk, conspicuously tilting his head in my direction. Delicacy. I appreciated it in all its obviousness. Jorgan just nodded and walked off.

Tanno Vik happened by not long after, and he walked all the way into the mess to lounge against the counter and look knowingly at Kirsk. Kirsk took a second before breaking into a grin. "Vik! You price-gouging bandit!"

Malice and amusement competed on the Weequay's face. "Volheis, you bleeding-heart undercutter."

Kirsk shrugged modestly. "'Volheis' is just my business name," he said. "My friends call me Savins."

"My brother," I added, in case that needed clearing up.

Vik's blue eyes lit on me, then Kirsk, then me, then Kirsk. "Heh. That explains a lot," he said, and sauntered off.

"It does?" Kirsk asked me.

"I guess," I said. "When I met him it was to direct an arms deal he was cutting to the Republic rather than selling it on the open market."

"Oh, yeah, way to get on his bad side. He's...quite a guy."

"He seemed happy enough to sign back on when he realized we were going to pay him to use the best possible materials to blow things up."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. Just saying...quite a guy. Not to be too harsh, but getting him and losing...I've seen better trades. All things considered."

That hit hard, maybe harder than it should have, maybe somehow less hard than I deserved. *Vierce, please.* I pushed the remainder of my soup aside and walked away.

## **10. WORK NEEDS DOING**

"Sir."

I froze when I heard Dorne's voice behind me. The old battlefield of my dreams cleared away; nothing ever made it do that before, but it seems it knew when it wasn't the most hurtful thing around.

I held still and hoped I'd heard wrong.

"Sir," Dorne said again.

"Sergeant," I said, my voice a lot steadier than the rest of me, "you can't be here." Enough things I had lost were in my dreams, I guess, but this was different. The whole reason things had happened this way was I had stayed far away from her.

"I think there's no place I'm needed more."

I turned around. I wasn't sure what she was going to look like; unlike most of my screw-ups, or even just the bloody things I'd happened to be near, I hadn't been there to see this one.

But she was as I remembered her, seemingly unhurt, armored and standing tall, tidy and ready for duty. In that moment I wanted more than anything for this to be real.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"You weren't the only one taken in, sir."

"I was the one who should've known better."

"Would you believe I'm glad to hear you say that?" She blinked rapidly a few times and ducked her head. And then, in a few quick steps, she ran up to me and...hugged me, hiding her face against my chest. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing for me," she said in a muffled voice.

Not knowing what else to do, I put my arms around her. "Too little, too late, is what I'm doing." She stayed still and quiet and hard with tension. "I will get justice," I told her. "Any way I have to."

"I know. That's something we could always count on you for."

"It's not enough. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything."

"I don't think *all* of it bears apologizing for," she said with a tiny amused lilt to her voice. "We were doing well toward the end."

"Yeah," I said around the lump in my throat. We were getting along, fitting as a team and a friendly one at that. Until I found the slightest excuse to turn on her.

"The squad may not be at full strength for a while," she warned. "Be careful."

"We'll manage." I would have to.

She took a deep breath and let it out. "Well, then." She stepped back, and I was quick to let her go. "It'll be all right, sir."

"That's not true."

She twitched a quick-disappearing smile. "I've served as best I could, sir, but in the end I'm still not certain how many people would tell me that."

If there were anything I could do to comfort her I would, but I really had neither the right nor the means to help now, except by seeing that the record was set straight. "I—" I started, and then suddenly she was gone and I was back in my bunk, cold and hurting.

I lay awake for a while after that. It was probably the most painful dream I ever wanted to go back to; but even if I could, dreams being what they are, I had already forgotten what I was going to say.

\*

I was still awake when my alarm went off. I sat up and leaned across to the room's holo to call General Garza right away. Her assistant answered, made some apologetic noises, and took a message. I went on to prep for the day until Garza's call sent me running for the main holo.

"Captain. You have something to report?"

"I do, sir." I was tired enough to trip over my tongue more than once trying to describe what Kirsk had uncovered about the holo, and what Balkar conspicuously hadn't been able to uncover about the staff who had supposedly checked over it.

When I was done, all she said for a minute was "I see."

"We can take this to the Senate, right? It'd clear her name in no time."

"Captain, I'll take this under advisement, but by now you must have realized that the situation is very delicate. I want to take the heat off Havoc Squad as much as you do, but the individuals pressing the matter won't be easy to convince. So long as we're scrutinizing evidence sources the off-hours investigation of her commanding officer is likely to raise eyebrows, especially since their reports already noted your apparent inclination toward protecting her."

"General, we both know anything I helped with, I wasn't helping for her sake. Favoritism doesn't enter into it. What we have now is proof, not opinion."

"And I'll take it into consideration. But until we've got someone else to blame, this is going to look like nothing more than a desperate attempt at saving face by muddying the waters. Things at this level don't run on fairness, captain. The politicians want someone to point fingers at."

"'Imps' not good enough? I'll call..." I'd call Balkar, is what I'd do. "I'll get back to you, General."

Her voice turned a little colder. "The Gauntlet matters more than clearing one soldier's name, is that clear?"

It wasn't all that clear. The truth isn't a second priority in my book. But I knew what I could and couldn't do right that minute. "Yes, sir," I said.

"Good. Now that the Safecrackers are back in friendly territory, there's one more soldier I want you to locate and recruit. His name is Sergeant Yuun, and he is the finest technician in the Republic Army. He's of an unusual species, the Gand, and according to their shamanic traditions he's a skilled Findsman. No one understands it, but the results are undeniable."

It didn't feel that important, but this was my actual job. My responsibility. I shouldn't fail all of those at once. "All right. So where do I find Sergeant Yuun?"

"He's currently on a mission on Hoth."

"Hoth!?" I couldn't investigate anything from there. "Sir, if it's a skilled technician you're after I know a slicer who can handle any Imp tech you can throw his way."

She cocked an eyebrow and very obviously didn't take that seriously. "A soldier?" she asked.

"No," I admitted. Kirsk wouldn't be able to fake that one.

"We're playing this by the book, Captain. Sergeant Yuun is on Hoth. He's scavenging crashed Imperial warships there in order to piece together a functional Umbra encrypter – the machine responsible for the Empire's most secure military codes. That project is critical. Rendezvous with Sergeant Yuun on Hoth. Assist him with his mission there. He has already been informed of his transfer to Havoc Squad."

"Sir..." This wasn't the time to make demands. Even if I wanted to. "Will you see that the information I gave you reaches the right people?"

"I'll do what I can," she said flatly. "But I wouldn't get my hopes up. Not until we have a much more complete answer than the one we've got." Her image flickered out.

I kicked the base of the holo. "I can't get a complete answer if I'm on *Hoth*."

"Boss, tell me you did not say Hoth." Tanno Vik sauntered in, looking, as ever, slightly sleepy even though I knew he was watching everything at once.

"I did. Because we're going."

"Didn't you have some thing about pulling Havoc Squad out of their bad books first?"

"Garza doesn't think it'll convince anybody. If she doesn't set someone else on this I'll..."

Vik watched. There wasn't any malice to it. He just seemed interested in what I would do.

"We're going to Hoth," I said frustratedly. "If I can't get Dorne's investigation pushed through committee we'll just have to dismantle the Empire and then reopen the question."

"Yeah, sure," he said. "I've heard worse backup plans."

"You have?" I wasn't sure what answer I wanted.

Vik just grinned. "I've been around, boss. Worse is possible."

That wasn't in any way encouraging, but it was food for thought.

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"Legate. We need to talk. In person."

The off-blond agent known as Legate made a slightly concerned face at his holo. "Kothe, I'm a little busy. My work on Taris is going all right but it's dicey stuff, I can't just walk off."

"Which is why I'm coming to you. We should rendezvous by Olaris Spaceport, I'll send you the coordinates. Expect me in about eight hours."

"Acknowledged and understood." Legate nodded farewell and stashed his holo again.

Then Legate, who was also Cipher Nine, looked down at the man sprawled at his feet. Chance, battered and bloodied, couldn't talk, but he hadn't managed to die just yet.

"Sooner or later the day will come when our good friend Kothe can't say the word, either," Nine told him. "But today I'll have to settle for you. Goodbye, Chance."

\*



The bunker was a shambles on the outside but neatly maintained within: yet another of the safehouses the dotted the Tarisian landscape under the auspices of a dozen competing interests. A somewhat ragged-looking Legate found Arduin Kothe standing in the entry chamber. "Kothe, I need to report that an Imperial patrol intercepted Chance. I came...too late to do anything."

"Damn," Kothe said softly. "If this mission weren't so urgent I wouldn't have sent him at all, he wasn't ready for field work in a hot zone."

"He faced it well. He had the keyword, I almost got there in time, but...in the end it wasn't enough. I'm sorry." Legate set his fists on his hips and frowned at the ground. "I wish I had more coworkers like him."

"The mission has to continue," Kothe said solemnly. "That's the best we can do for him."

"The mission will continue, I'll see to that. But first, you wanted something?"

Kothe nodded. "Yes, I have some questions about something that's come to my attention."

"Ask away."

"Nar Shaddaa. Mere days before you met with me. You had a slightly different face. You matched a personnel file for a Captain Raznic who appears to have been planted some time ago. You set up one of Havoc Squad's soldiers for a fall, rubbed it in her CO's face, and disappeared again."

Legate's mien was sorrowful and deadly serious. "Yes. I did. My last 'straight' job." He raised his eyes to Kothe's. "She was innocent. The woman I framed. Elara Dorne. I've ruined innocents before, I think we all have. But this one was the only person I ever had a chance to meet who felt the way I did about defecting. And I chose not to meet with her, because that wasn't the job." He looked away. "I did my duty," he spat. "But if I had any doubts about coming to your side before that, that's the mission that laid them to rest."

"I see." Kothe paused a moment. "There are people calling for full investigation into the affair."

Legate didn't meet his gaze. "Are you handing me over for justice?"

"No. I need you, Legate. The work we have ahead is something I don't think I can do without you, and in the end that's more important than holding you to account for what you've done in the past."

"I appreciate it." Legate managed to draw himself to his full height and meet Kothe levelly, eye to eye. "I am sorry. About Elara, about quite a lot beyond her. There's nothing I can do about those crimes but leave them behind to work with you."

"I know. As we speak you're working to contribute to something much greater. And as we go, I can hope that someday you'll mean those words."

For just a moment, fear flashed in Legate's hazel eyes. "What do you mean, sir?"

The little background warmth in Kothe's expression vanished. "You're a smooth liar, Legate. But I've got a pretty good idea what you would be if this chance weren't forced on you. I hope you prove me wrong. Like I said when you so glibly signed on, I hope that once you've seen the good we do here, you will come around. For real this time." He took a step back. "But if I'd known how good you were at arranging accidents I would never have partnered Chance with you."

"I didn't arrange Chance's death."

Kothe studied Legate's face closely for a very long moment. "Perhaps," he said. "If you didn't, it was only for lack of opportunity. Keyword: onomatophobia. Skip the empty protestations and get back to work."

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## **11. DORNE**

Too slow. It was all going too damn slow.

I tried to keep half my mind on work; doing that much was a struggle, but I had a job to do and Hoth didn't leave a lot of room for error. Sergeant Yuun seemed nice enough anyway. He was a professional. But the way the Gand talked, I don't know if it was him being a Findsman or what...he would always break everything down, say that this sign leads to that, make it look like the way is obvious, and every single time it was an obvious way to something I didn't care about.

It was shaping up to be days and maybe weeks of speeding here and there in the snow, picking out scattered Imp installations, old and active, to gather what we needed for this Umbra encrypter. Killing Imps was involved, which kept M1-4X happy. Scrounging valuable tech on the side for off-hours deals was involved, which kept Tanno Vik happy. Jorgan seemed to be holding up all right. I couldn't stop hearing Dorne's voice. I think the ice planet would've been hell even if I weren't so desperate to be elsewhere, doing something worth more.

I took the chance to wipe out any Imperial presence we came across. It wasn't enough.

I got a call back at base a few days later. Comms to and from Hoth are tricky, so if you get one you want to jump on it. The staff at the base offered me a private conference room to take the call in.

Which is how I found myself facing the recent Imperial defector named Aleksei Dorne.

"Lieutenant Savins. Or Captain, they tell me." The blond youth didn't make the address friendly.

"D-Dorne." I didn't have anything to say to him. I wouldn't even know where to start.

"I understand that the circumstances of my sister's death must remain classified but I feel I'm owed more of an explanation than the Army courier gave."

If I hadn't known Sergeant Dorne as long as I had, I'd think that formal tone meant Aleksei was feeling calm. But if he was anything like her he was furious under all that wording. "I wasn't allowed to deliver the news in person. I'm sorry, Dorne. Your sister was a model soldier."

"You don't need to tell me that. But now it seems that Personnel Division is very curious about possible correspondence with the Empire, correspondence that neither she nor I held."

"Yeah." Of course. "I figure they would be."

"I don't know what they're hoping to find. Was the investigation your idea?"

"The investigation is because she was allegedly selling secrets back across the border."

"Nonsense. Elara would never go back on her sworn oath. I recognize that you never believed that but it's true nevertheless." He took a few agitated steps. "In fact, this must have been a great victory for you. I still don't know why you let her recruit me to begin with but I recall your manner made it quite clear that it wasn't for my health. Or hers. To be rid of her entirely must be a very great relief."

"I'm not relieved when my people die, Aleksei!"

"If you could have made a treason charge stick on our accents alone you'd have done it, Captain! Don't bother with the pretend sympathy, I only want the facts of the matter. You owe me that much."

"The facts? She was innocent of all charges, she died in a setup, and I haven't yet figured out who arranged that setup. When I do he's not going to get away."

"You acknowledge that it was a setup?"

"Anyone who looked closely at the facts would see that."

"And your superiors know this? It isn't what I was told at all."

"I have to be careful here. People like the easy answer." It sounded like weasel words and I knew it, but what else could I do? "I'm working on finding the truth but it might take time."

"You are," he scoffed. "Surely they can afford to put someone more unbiased on the case."

"It's delicate."

"What's so hard about investigating lies? Elara told me the Republic stood for justice."

"And she was right. And I mean to see to that."

"She defended you, you know. The last time we spoke, before her...her murder. She said that things had improved, since what I saw of you. That you were fair. *My sister is dead now*, Captain, and I see nothing of *fairness* in it."

I didn't have anything else to offer him. "Give me time. I won't leave it as it is, with her – and you – under suspicion. Give me time."

"I don't owe you time. I don't owe you anything. I hope you're proud of your superior ways but you'd better not expect me to congratulate you for good intentions." He started pacing again. "You and I won't speak again until her name is cleared. So if you prefer to be rid of both of us, all you have to do is keep sitting there. Goodbye, Captain." The holo went dead.

Jorgan knocked not long after. I shook myself and turned to face him. "What's up?" I said. Let it be something I could fix.

"Wanted to know when you were getting out of here, sir. Any plans for the evening?"

"Yeah. We're finding Yuun's next little scrap. We've got a few hours left in the day."

"If by 'the day' you mean by midnight," said the Cathar. "Sir, we can't keep this pace up much longer."

"Then we'd better get the job done soon. "

\*

I remembered missing the shot. I had a pistol and a few grenades, no more weaponry than most of the resistance men in the raid. Blaster fire was everywhere, the screaming noise, the acrid smell that came from air torn up too many ways at once. The Imp was making a break for the trailer where the pulse generator was spinning up, waiting for the final confirmation; all I had to do was shoot him. All I had to do was shoot him and it wouldn't have gone the way it did.

The blast picked me up and slammed me back; the impact with the brick wall broke something even with the body armor. I fell hard, tried to pick myself up, ended up sitting on the curb trying and failing to make my body move through the pain.

It flashed, went white for a second. The smoke and bodies cleared.

And Dorne was there, uniformed, cleaner than anything else in that hellhole. Like things weren't bad enough. She walked up sat beside me on the curb.

Any apology would seem...well, redundant, but it'd bear saying again. Except that just apologizing meant I hadn't accomplished anything new. And I hated to say it like that.

"Dorne," I said.

"Captain," she said. "It's never easy, is it?"

I let out a sharp whuff of a laugh. "No. It's not. Look, I haven't given up, I swear. I'm pushing everything I can without—"

"Without deserting, I know, sir."

Then if she already knew what I was trying and how I wasn't succeeding at it, why was she here? There was really only one other thing I could report on. "Your brother called," I said.

"Ah. After all he went through to reach me...this must be terrible for him."

"He wasn't happy. I can't blame him."

"I honestly don't know how he reacted the first time he lost me, when I defected. When we saw each other again we didn't talk about it in any detail. Nevertheless it was good to have him, for a few more weeks. It was a few weeks more than I

had ever expected." She leaned into my side, as naturally as anything. "Thank you for that."

"I..." It hadn't been nearly enough and I hadn't even done it for her sake. Kirsk had made it sound like the right thing to do, and it was, but I had begrudged Dorne and her brother every minute of it. "You're welcome," I said anyway. "And I know there's things in the way, but I won't let your case stay where it is."

"All right. It's...nice, to know someone remembers."

"Stars." I wrapped an arm around her and felt her leaning more snugly into me. "You're one of my people, Dorne. I don't forget. I only wish I'd figured it out sooner."

She was quiet for a little while. Then: "Would you send my personal effects to Aleksei at some point? He would appreciate it."

"He doesn't want to hear from me until I've got your record sorted out." I swallowed hard. "I'll get them to him as soon as humanly possible. With all prereqs done. I just...I have to get out of here first."

"You will. But, the mission first, sir, for the Republic. That's what Havoc Squad is for."

"If we can't look after our own people, what the hell good are we?"

There was a pause. "You know," she said quietly, "I envied the people you held in that regard. Even before I was truly certain you had a redeeming quality I envied the people you held such stubborn loyalties to."

My chest ached. "You should've been one of them."

"There wasn't enough time."

"There was plenty of time. I wasn't trying, and I'm sorry."

She looked around. "This is why. Isn't it? Because all you knew of my countrymen was here." She scrambled away from me and to her feet, looking up and down the downtown city street, the mostly-intact buildings, a few windows boarded up at ground level, a few Imperial flags hung recently enough that nobody had

defaced them. The overturned speeder in the middle of the road, and the pair of trailers behind it. The pulse generator was back in place, like it had never blown.

"Don't," I said. I didn't want her looking around here. Everything I fought in my memories, every place I kept revisiting, it was mine, not hers. The first thing I had liked about her was what she was different from the Imps I remembered here.

"Do you always come back here?" she asked, just as if she hadn't heard me.

"There's a few places. This is one of them."

"How old were you for this one?"

"Eighteenish? Must've been, my face was still in one piece. A lot of the dreams are even older than this."

"I see." She had wandered up to the rear trailer; now she stepped up and peered into the pulse generator's crate.

All I could think was it was going to blow, again, and friends were going to die, again. "Dorne, stop it!"

"Trust me, sir." She looked over the pulse generator closely, not quite touching until she had given the whole thing a once-over. Then, with the neat precision she brought to all fine work, she cracked open the shell and started working inside, tugging a couple of things free. In a few moments she beckoned. "Come here."

"Are you nuts?" I knew it was sitting there, inert, and the damage had been done, and yet the thought of walking up to it was like thinking of throwing myself on a grenade.

"Vierce." The way her accent turned my name grabbed all my attention at once. She beckoned again. "Come here."

*Vierce, please.* I couldn't turn her down. I got up and brushed myself off, then forced myself toward the trailer and its deadly cargo. She had the sense not to move a muscle while I climbed up to crouch opposite her over the pulse generator's open crate.

"Is any of this familiar?" she said.



I looked into the case to see a mess of wiring and metalwork. "I was never the tech, but yeah, I've at least salvaged parts."

"Can you disarm it?"

"I didn't," I said.

"Sir. Can you?" She watched as I reached out, hesitated. Maybe I didn't know how to do this after all. "Go on," she said. She very lightly set her fingertips on my hands to guide me in to what looked like the central detonator control. "Take it out."

"It's not going to matter."

"Please, trust me," she repeated.

So I reached the rest of the way into the wire-crazed space and tugged the little metal prism free. It came loose easily enough, and I pulled it out and spent a minute staring at its smooth featureless case. Then I crushed it between my hands, not really caring about the sharp edges. It needed breaking. If I'd taken it out in time the Imps would never have been able to let the bomb off. "I should've gotten to this sooner."

She gave me an understanding look. "You have a job to do, sir. One for the Republic, and one for me. And since you've made up your mind to resolve it, I don't believe anything will stop you."

"I won't stop. But it's too late to fix things for you."

"That part already happened, true. But it doesn't mean you always have to come back here."

She was so calm, so...patient. If I were in her place I'd want nothing more than to claw Vierce Savins to shreds. I had to ask. "Dorne, why are you—"

Too late. It was over.

## 12. ESCAPED

---

Ardun Kothe's SIS team had scattered to secure the warehouse that held the Shadow Arsenal, a hidden superweapon that could turn the tide of the war. Legate was bound by his keyword to man the facility's shield station.

Except that Legate was no longer bound by the keyword.

He met Wheel where the droid was standing sentry duty over the front gate. "Shields are secured," Legate reported, "from what I could slice it looks like the center control console is a better place for me to be. Everything quiet here?"

"Yes," said Wheel. "Thus far operations are optimal."

"Yeah," said Legate, nodding. "Good...You know something? I've always loved machines. They fascinate me. They're such ingenious inventions." He shoved his hands in his pockets and nodded again. "And they always do just what you want, if you know what buttons to press."

He flicked a small electrostatic device directly into the mid-torso gap of Wheel's chassis. In the moment of stunned sparking he swung his rifle around to slam Wheel off balance, then bore him down and flicked a vibroknife to sever a couple of circuits at the droid's neck.

Cipher Nine straightened and pocketed the knife again. "That was the off button," he said lightly. "Sorry I didn't have time for anything more nuanced."

He took a look around; no one else in sight. He tapped his earpiece to reach the next agent on his list. "Saber, where are you?"

The Twi'lek responded right away. "Watching by the crates inside the big house. Problem?"

"Yeah. I'm being followed. I'll lead him your way, just tell me where to go."

He started trotting, following her directions. When he finally reached her he found her halfway up a minor mountain of crates, her rifle set up to look over the floor of the warehouse.

She stood up to greet him. "Hey. I didn't see him on your way in. Who is it?"

"Imperial operative." He walked up beside her to take a look around.

"Where?" she asked tensely.

One hand to twist her arm up behind her, a second to seize her neck and ram her up against the nearest crate. "Right here," he breathed, then hauled her back to slam her again. She grunted and started the sharp flexible motions that would slip her out of a weaker man's grip. Cipher Nine just pinned her harder against the crate, using his whole body to trap hers in place. He bent his head down close to her ear. "I've wanted to do this since the day I met you, little girl."

It wasn't often he felt so richly justified in snapping someone's neck. It was a hell of an appetizer for his mission and his revenge. Cipher Nine left Saber to slide limply down the crate wall to the floor; he was already on his way to the main course.

Ardun Kothe was deep inside the warehouse, struggling with the control console near an inner forcefield. He straightened when Cipher Nine approached.

"Legate," he said, without quite turning around. "I thought I felt you. You were supposed to be back at the shields...ah. You're free. Aren't you."

"I am. Did your informant tell you that was possible? Or did they say I was safe to handle?"

He turned around slowly, radiating the same weary determination he always had. "Nothing's ever 'safe'. I took my chances."

"Right, and you were going to help me redeem myself or something. I've had the chance to do good for you and yours, Ardun. I have to say, no part of it gave me the slightest desire to repent."

"I see. So your true nature shows after all."

"My nature's a malleable thing, but even I can't force it into the sorry mold you people go for. You know, I was hoping for some grand secret? Ardun Kothe, fallen Jedi, and the rest of the SIS band...what is it that keeps you together in the bureaucracy of your lives? What helps you go on in the fight to preserve your Republic? And how much more powerful could it be in the right hands? But there's nothing. Only borrowed tools and men too broken down to go all the way in using them."

"You forget our principles, Legate. That's the part you're missing. Before Ardun Kothe the SIS chief, there was a better man. A Jedi Knight who couldn't live up to the code. That Jedi may have failed...but even Ardun Kothe remembers what he's living in this world of shadows to defend."

"Do you? I don't see the motivation. And the worst part is, none of you people *enjoy* this. You could rule the galaxy if you could only drag yourselves out of review committees, but you don't. You still pretend to be better than people like me. You're too busy holding your nose to take the prize by both hands." He looked Ardun Kothe over. "Too late now. So if you want to fall on that lightsaber you're fondling that'd be just fine with me. Stars know you won't beat me. Jedi don't know how to kill."

"I'm not a Jedi anymore." Kothe finally activated the lightsaber. Too bad for him, it wouldn't be enough.

\*

Cipher Nine turned away from the broken Jedi. One more. Just one more.

A holoprojector he hadn't even noticed clicked and flared to life nearby. Cipher Nine looked up at Hunter's smiling face. "Well, this is a surprise," said the SIS agent. "I was finished with Ardun, but I had plans for you. We could've wandered the galaxy together – me as the captain, you as my servant."

Cipher Nine's mind raced. Had Hunter been watching? Why wasn't Ardun Kothe's death a problem for him? Hunter knew something. He had seamlessly infiltrated the SIS, but apparently he wasn't of them. The casual infuriating way he overused the keyword indicated that he had an appreciation for power. He knew things. He had things. Cipher Nine wanted it. "'Could have'? Hunter, are you saying I'm not invited?"

"Oh, you're no good to me now, Cipher. I am sad that it had to end this way. It's been a lot of fun. But big changes are coming. Imperial Intelligence and the SIS...history will forget them. And it'll forget you. I just tipped off a squadron of Imperial bombers. That facility is about to be wiped out."

"I won't be." Oh, no. Cipher Nine shivered a little; it would be a shame to lose the Arsenal, but a new game was starting. "Keep an eye out for me, Hunter. Because with or without our special word, I'm not done with you."

Hunter just smiled. "Move fast."

Cipher Nine moved.

.....

We had our hellish scavenger hunt on Hoth done. We recruited our slicer Yuun. Him, along with Tanno Vik for specialized demolitions and the Safecrackers to break down the vessel's planet-based shield, added to M1-4X and Jorgan and me for a full team. Or as full as it was going to get. We were ready for the assault on the dreadnaught carrying the prototype Gauntlet weapon.

We approached in in quick hyperspace jumps, no step long enough for the Gauntlet weapon itself to lock onto us. Then it was boarding time. I sent Jorgan and Forex go for the enemy ship's bridge to download anything we could get from the shipboard computers. I went with Vik to rig the whole vessel to blow – we wouldn't be leaving salvage except for scrap metal.

We hit heavy fire from the start; only a lot of line of sight tricks and the use of narrow side corridors kept us from getting mowed down outright. Vik knew his stuff, though, and so do I. We split from Jorgan and Forex and cleared our own way to the locations Vik had picked out. My main job was just to cover him. Busy job, but I could do it.

"Last one," he said at last, turning away from the doorway he'd been fiddling with, and he grinned at me. "Ready to go?"

"More than ready." All we had to do now was get out before the place blew.

We had to pause in a cover-free corridor to clear some troopers behind us. The place was heating up, and badly so. It reminded me of other places. No. I had to keep moving. My vision started to narrow like it did when combat got bad; that was sort of common. Not a problem by itself, just a warning. If I wasn't running full tilt before I was now.

We rounded the corner and saw another trio of Imperial troopers. I fired. So did Vik. It seemed that everything slowed...and then I stopped.

The crazed chorus of blasters kept going. On and on. *You've got no right, Imperial.* Blaster fire everywhere, but I wasn't doing anything. I wasn't doing anything. *Vierce, please.* The flash and biting smell was all around; this was where men and women died, and kept on dying. I wasn't doing anything.

"Captain!" Someone was bellowing. Not her. Not her, because I – "VIERCE!"

I looked around. Where the hell was this? Blaster fire looks just about the same anywhere. The Gauntlet slammed back then. Mission. Ship. Explosives. Run. I knew where to move. Vik was holding his side and still desperately firing; I waved and we got going.

He only made it a few steps into the next hall before yelling and stumbling. I sprayed fire over him and braced my rifle to haul him up with one arm. All that mattered now was speed.

My steps pounded twice as loud now. Vik was hurting, but he did what he could to keep moving. I did what I could to clear the way, trying every now and then to shoot down any kind of loose ceiling piping to cover our retreat. Had to go faster.

Jorgan, Yuun, and Forex were at the airlock. "We done?" I barked.

"Yes, sir. Ready to go," said Jorgan.

"Take us out." I reeled onto the ship, hauled Vik toward the medbay. If he died because of my freezeup...

Well, that wouldn't be anything new, would it?

I laid the big guy out and tried to keep it together. Vik was out cold; Yuun helped me do what first aid we could while I cursed the lack of a real medic. A lack I could only blame on myself.

I had to keep it together.

I got Vik, unconscious but at least not actively bleeding, into the kolto, and went on to the bridge, ignoring whatever M1-4X yelled on my way past. I had to make some kind of showing with the squad but I wanted to make it quick. Don't screw this up.

Jorgan was at the controls, watching the vast bulk of the Gauntlet. A few spots were already blowing, and the explosions were starting to rip along straight lines as critical systems ignited.

Jorgan looked to me. "We downloaded a huge collection of plans from their main computer. Our techs'll have a lot on their hands just reading it, much less building any of it themselves."

"Yeah. Good." I stared out at the big breaking ship for a few seconds. "I'll be in my quarters. Take us home, Lieutenant."

Jorgan gave me a funny look, but he let me go.

I didn't even shut the door, I just sat down on the bunk and...stopped. Again. I don't even know when I got moving, but next thing I knew I was showering. Better be more or less ready to talk to Garza when we returned to Coruscant. Better be ready. Better not freeze.

I wanted so badly to rest.

\*

We holed a med team to take Vik straight off the ship to the nearest medcenter. The rest of us made straight for Garza's office. I had to keep it together. I would.

She was waiting at the door of her own office. She waved us in, looked us over.  
"Specialist Vik?"

"Injured, sir. He's getting medical attention now."

She nodded sharply. "Good. He got the job done. Good work, all of you." She got back to her usual frown. "Senator Zian and his associates are determined to place Havoc Squad under review now that its urgent mission is finished. We've got a lot of work to do."

"We just dismantled the weapon that would've shut down our fleet's hyperspace travel. What more do they want?"

"What they want is to wipe out anyone who had anything to do with Sergeant Dorne's alleged treason and bury the entire incident. If we have no other evidence-based explanation for what happened on Nar Shaddaa, we can't get around that."

"I'm looking, sir. Or I will now that the Gauntlet's down."

"We don't have leads," she said sharply.

"I'll find them."

"I can only give you a couple of days. Take the time off. Preferably off planet. Then I'll be sending you on another mission, one that should appeal to you if you're interested in clearing names. Not coincidentally it's also going to distance you from Coruscant when Senator Zian comes knocking." She frowned harder. "I'm looking into matters, too, Captain. We might be able to force Zian off our backs, but I can't guarantee that any time soon."

"Then I'll move fast, sir."



### **13. OBSTRUCTION**

We left Garza's office and made for the Senate plaza. I guess from there all we could do was go rest for a bit. The only thing I wanted to do more than rest was do something to help.

My holo beeped before it mattered. "Hold up, people," I said wearily. If this was a political thing I really didn't know what I was going to do.

Whether Balkar of the SIS counted as political...well, I guess that depended on what he was going to say.

He smiled sunnily. "Vierce! I'm glad you're in town. A little surprised. The atmosphere's less than healthy for some types right now. But I'm glad. I have some news."

"So spill."

"We should meet up at Kalyn's old place. You remember, don't you?"

Of course he could never say anything straight. I remembered Kalyn, though. A young woman I'd found imprisoned on Coruscant, caught up in a crazed cyborg-modification scheme she wanted no part of. I knew the way to where I'd found her and the others. I guess it was the best meeting place Balkar could think of without naming the location for listeners to recognize.

The thought that he might have news got me going. "Jorgan. You ready?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir."

\*

Balkar was lounging against a pillar near the building we were going for. He waved or possibly just lazily stretched without making eye contact and then sauntered down the way, finally ducking into a different building. Jorgan and I followed.

By the time we reached the little lounge within, Balkar was already lounging on a couch like he'd been there all day. He grinned up at us. "Hi there. Have a seat."

After half a second's pause, "You really do want to be sitting down for this one, Vierce."

I crossed my arms and frowned down at him. "Look, I don't mean to sound ungrateful but I've had enough of games for one decade. Do you have something for me?"

He examined my expression and sobered a little. "Yes. I have a suspect for our Captain Raznic. Imperial for sure. I wasn't free to chase him because, as far as anyone could tell, he came to our side."

"Our side?"

"He came to the SIS. Said he'd reformed. We do let these guys do that, especially if they've got valuable information to offer, and he was pure gold."

"The SIS let him in!?"

"It's a risk we take that does more to hurt the other side than almost anything else we can do. Bad risk in this case. His supervisor was convinced he had him under control. He was the sticking point in my getting information at all." Balkar crossed his arms, looking grimmer than I've ever seen him. "His name was Arduin Kothe. He was the guy who recruited our double agent code named Legate, and he made absolutely certain that I couldn't touch Legate for anything he did. Including the hit on Sergeant Dorne."

Legate, huh? "I notice you never gave their names before now."

"I'm free to give them now. Arduin Kothe is dead. Mission gone wrong on Quesh. Reports say his entire team is down. Including our man."

"Reports? Do we have bodies?"

Balkar shook his head. "An Imperial air strike was called in on the site, and our forces on the ground were given no reason to investigate further."

I felt my fists clenching. "I want to know he's dead, Jonas."

"That's something I can't answer from here. Water-cooler-chat questions are really more the kind of thing I can sneak in. But, I did get coordinates for you."

"Then it's a good thing I've got a few days off." I looked to Jorgan. "Are we good to move?"

"Any time you're ready, sir."

On the one hand, if I didn't get my act together I was completely unfit for command, here or anywhere. On the other, the site on Quesh wasn't getting any fresher.

"All right," I said. "Coordinates. Jorgan, call Yuun and Forex. We're shipping out."

\*

When I got back to the hangar where I'd left Havoc Squad's Thunderclap, I found the big door to the spaceport's maintenance passage open. There were workers everywhere, including two squatting on the wing, prodding at something they had cracked open.

I started toward it but didn't get far. "Sir! Sir, hold on!" One of the mechanics was running up to me from the side, and I was more than ready to hear the explanation for the guys swarming my ship.

"What's this?" I demanded.

He stopped in my shadow, peering up at me. "We've got orders for engine maintenance, sir, it's already under way. It's going to be at least forty-eight hours before she checks out. Were you not notified?"

"No," I snapped, still staring at the ship. "No, I wasn't notified."

"We'll clear it as soon as we can, sir. I realize your squad has places to be."

"You have no idea."

"Three guesses who ordered this one," Jorgan said darkly.

"I don't even...it doesn't matter who ordered it, they've already pulled the damn thing apart." I turned my attention back to the foreman. "You lock down this

hangar and call my holo when this is finished. Understand? Nobody else's holo, and nobody else's orders."

Whatever I looked like, I had his attention. "Uhh, yes, sir. I'll do that, sir."

"Good." I took my holo out and spun to leave. "Guys, there's one other private ship I can try."

\*

Not only was Kirsk in town, he was docked in the Senate Plaza spaceport, on the grounds that he knew who would be getting first crack at us as soon as we got back. He may be an idiot, but he's clever sometimes.

When we reached his hangar we found him busy talking to a pretty Mirialan girl dressed up in something slick and about a size too small. I wondered how long it'd taken him from touching down on planet to buying drinks for her, whoever she was. I swear he'll make point four past lightspeed if left unchecked.

He pushed off the crate he'd been leaning against and beamed as we approached. "There, what'd I tell you?" he said.

His friend turned to us and stared, her mouth forming a little 'o'. "Who's this?"

"This?" said Kirsk. "Just the guys dragging me away from you. The shore leave contingent, here for me to haul 'em off planet to escape military life. This is my brother, Vierce. Vierce, meet Loora."

I didn't have time for this. I reminded myself not to let loose on the bystander. "How do you do," I said tensely.

"And, more or less in order, Sergeant Jorgan, the inimitable M1-4X, and this must be Sergeant Yuun."

"Charmed," said the Mirialan in a girlish voice. "Gee, there wouldn't even be room for me on board. Have fun, won't you, boys?"

Kirsk smiled. "Fun won't start 'til I'm back in town, gorgeous. I'll call you." That finally got her to wave and trot off.

I spent a moment watching and waiting for her to get well out of earshot. "Thank you for not taking her with us," I muttered.

He looked after her with a cheerful smile. "I'll call her later. I should introduce you to her sister. Great girl."

It was never at any time a good idea to go anywhere near my brother's setups. Even if I wanted to in the first place, which I didn't. "I've got other things to worry about, Kirsk."

Sympathy glinted in his eye. "You won't always," he said breezily, and clapped my arm, turning toward the ship. "Come on."

We all piled onto the little freighter; outside the cargo bays the place was not spacious. M1-4X had to hunch up and walk crabwise to get anywhere; Kirsk directed him toward the nearest cargo hold.

I explained to Yuun as we walked, "Kirsk is nonstandard but he's with me. It's all right to cooperate." I considered calling my brother trustworthy and decided that might be going a bit far. "But if he gives you some harebrained idea, run it by me first, all right?"

"Understood," said Yuun. I wondered what Gand calm sounded like, because he only ever sounded one way and I suspect calm was it. Lucky bastard.

"I owe you a rundown of what we're doing, for that matter. I need to sleep first." Stars, did I need to sleep. "We'll meet up in the workshop in a few hours, all right?"

"Actually, I sort of need you or Jorgan driving," called Kirsk from down one corridor. "That is if I can get some work done in the cargo bay." He trotted back around. "Can I borrow some of your droid's processing cycles for this trick I've been trying to get my central computer to do? Nothing illegal, promise."

I gave him a skeptical look.

"In our current jurisdiction," he amended.

I rolled my eyes. Kirsk probably needed whatever-this-was to bail him out of yesterday's trouble, whatever that might be. And I did owe him a serious favor for this ride. "It's authorized," I told Forex.

"Acknowledged and understood. But I look forward to reaching our objective and continuing our mission!"

"I think we all do. Kirsk, don't make me regret this."

"Absolutely guaranteed," Kirsk said sunnily. "You're the best, big brother. – By the way, if you need a knockout shot there's some in the little side room near the bridge. I actually labeled these ones. Accurately, even." He didn't mention the nightmares, just made sure I knew what solutions were on hand. He can be good like that. I nodded acknowledgment and got out of his way. I needed dreamless sleep.

\*

I woke groggy and sore a long time later. I guess the ride to Quesh takes a while. When I hit the bridge and found Jorgan and Yuun, Jorgan reported that we had only about an hour left to go.

"I've explained the situation, Captain," said Jorgan. "We all realize this is pretty much off the books."

"The books don't care until we've got something more to tell 'em. So yeah. If the side trip's a problem we'll drop you off for actual leave, but...if you're a Findsman, Yuun, I could really use that skill."

The Gand held still for a few moments. Then: "Sergeant Dorne sounds like an admirable soldier."

"Everything a Republic soldier should be," I said, nodding.

"And she is the one we seek now."

"No," I said flatly. "She's dead."

"This is true. You seek her anyway. What you seek at the end of her path is not this Legate. It is justice."

"I'm figuring once I find the one, the other won't be far behind."

Yuun leaned back against the wall. "Legate walked with both SIS and Imperial Intelligence? Spies leave confusing trails. Sometimes many, sometimes none. All

of them have patterns that careful watching will reveal. This is a challenge, Captain, but Yuun will try."

## **14. DESTRUCTION**

We saw the wreckage of the Shadow Arsenal facility from over a kilometer away.

Balkar had forwarded us what details on the place he had managed to pull or reconstruct. As we approached the wreckage I thought that if this was meant to be a collection of city-killers the warheads clearly hadn't managed to detonate. I wasn't sure what would've happened to the planet if they had. I've seen bombs that went off if you breathed on 'em wrong; I guess when you're building explosives with an actual budget you build 'em not to blow accidentally.

Still something to beware. You never trust unexploded ordnance. Ever. Treat it like just another rock and it will kill you.

I would stay away entirely, but the man responsible for Elara Dorne's disgrace and death had been here when the bombs were falling. Whether he got out alive or not, I intended to get my hands on him.

We had a lot of mess to pick through to get there. The beaten path was strewn with shredded metal and churned-up dirt as we got close. There had been a few buildings in the compound, it looked like. All wrecked by bombing, more thorough than I'd ever seen near my hometown. They wanted this place burned.

I signaled our speeders to stop. Kirsk, as usual, pulled up closer to me than safety would recommend and leaned over to comment. "And I thought the South Side got it bad."

"They wanted to leave some of the South Side to hang onto after," I said. "Not so here."

The important part of Balkar's advice was this: SIS agents were implanted with special transponders for emergency situations. They were set to total silence during operations, but supposedly they would switch to responding to a certain query code if left still for long enough. Short-range, unfortunately. There was still legwork involved.

We split up: Yuun and Jorgan, me and Kirsk, M1-4X by himself. Then we started picking through the wreckage.



Kirsk's holo, set to the frequency Balkar had specified, picked something up soon enough. He and I started in on the mess of scorched cargo crates, looking in every direction at once as we homed in.

Kirsk was the first to point. "There." He looked green.

The body had been a Twi'lek woman, now half buried under a fallen crate. I walked up to kneel and start searching for any signs left to glean.

"This one wasn't killed by the bombing," I told Kirsk. My throat was a little dry.

"How do you figure?"

"Check her neck." Burned and cut-up though the body was, none of the large-scale destruction could account for the way her head was turned. "Someone took her out before the fires came through."

"Oh." A pause. "Think the others might've been?"

"Most likely. Whatever real job the SIS had, our guy must've had a reason to be a hundred per cent sure these people were dead. The bombing was just covering his tracks."

"Maybe. That's some kind of messed up."

I found a card in her pocket and took that. Then, keeping my mind as still as I could, located the shallow implant I had been told to expect by her hip and took out my vibroknife. Just like emergency combat surgery. Dirty but quick, pull the shrapnel out, and I didn't have to bandage this one. Just the same, I arranged her coat to cover her as best I could when I was done.

Kirsk had stepped away and was staring elsewhere. He turned back when I faced him. "Listen," he said. "Vierce. If you need the extra pair of eyes I'll keep going, but this..." he looked at the woman's contorted body..."isn't really my specialty." His gaze flicked to me, and his eyes were pleading.

A body search specifically was something he'd never liked. I mean, nobody does, but Kirsk really, really hated being around any death he wasn't cheating. He was our slicer, thief, infiltrator, tech...never the cleanup crew if he could help it. "Can you find me a console, if there's a usable one left?" I said. That'd have him covering the same ground but with a much more comfortable focus. "You can go

with Forex, hunt for databanks, datapads, anything that'll tell us what happened here."

Kirsk swallowed and nodded jerkily. "Yeah, sure." He grinned weakly. "With any luck our guy left his diary lying around."

"You tend to carry a bit more luck around than I do. Holo if you find anything."

Jorgan checked in via earpiece minutes later. He and Yuun had already found one transponder near the outskirts of the destruction. With it there was a jacket, a blaster...and nothing else. No body in sight. "Huh," I said. "I guess we look for the other three now."

I worked my way further in. The place was eerie. A few unstable pieces of wreckage fell just from my passing near. I was in the ruins of a more or less central warehouse now; fallen roof chunks and huge stacks of cargo were everywhere.

Way at the back of that vast broken building I came upon the edge of a massive crater. The wreckage of a forcefield generator was scattered around nearby. What was inside was less smashed; the field might have held out for a while.

Less smashed, but a lot more slagged. If there were warheads in there...well. UXO is bad enough when it's just grenades. Missiles on this scale I didn't want to get near. I took a holopic for the SIS's benefit and then started to scan again, hoping I wouldn't have to go further forward. There was a transponder hit off to one side, nearby.

The body was charred beyond recognition. His implant was both partly exposed and partly melted, but I managed to separate it from him. I also picked up, from the ground couple of meters away, a damaged lightsaber. That sure as hell wasn't in the inventory I'd expected. I pocketed it and moved on.

But there wasn't a lot more to see. Yuun and Jorgan called in with the other two transponders and we arranged to meet where M1-4X and Kirsk had stopped.

That turned out to be near a blackened overhang where an outer wall had been. "Anything for me?" I asked Kirsk.

"No. Every holo and console here got completely wrecked." He scratched his head. "You find your guys?"

It was Jorgan, picking his way toward us, who answered. "Five SIS transponders if we include the two the captain called in. Only three bodies."

"Now isn't that interesting," he said, raising his eyebrows. "I guess that means we're not done?"

"No," I said. "We're not." In a way I was a little relieved to think I might get the kill on Legate after all. In another way I felt heartsick. I wanted this over and Legate stopped. "Those two are out there," I added. I turned to Yuun. "Any way you can tell where our survivors went?"

"Some equipment scattered in patterns. Few paths here lead to territory that is not hostile to Imperials. This may be enough. Let us take our speeders. Yuun does not know how far our quarry went."

He led the way, a quarter of the way around the ruined complex before he dove onto a side path that wound down across a valley. It wasn't even a path so much as a narrow less swampy strip.

He pulled up at the top of the next ridge. Ahead of us stretched a broad flat field. Yuun looked around, blinking slowly.

Jorgan surveyed the area. "Big enough for a shuttle to take off?"

"Looks like it," I said.

The Gand tilted his head. "There is a scent here. Strong. New. Unique."

"The shuttle?"

"No. Pheromonic. It departed with the ship."

"Friend of Legate's?"

"This is likely. Yuun will remember it. Two who stay on one path are easier to track than either alone."

I looked at the trampled area where Legate's shuttle might have been. "He was here, then," I said. "We've got something."

"Yes, sir," Jorgan said, a note of satisfaction in his voice.

"We're not nearly done yet."

"Yeah," said Kirsk, "but at least you can say you've seriously started."

"Yeah, thanks. That's an inspiring way to think of everything so far."

"This is huge, big brother. Plus I expect you already have a plan for the dramatic thing you're going to do about it."

I was going to kill the bastard. 'Dramatic' could go hang for all I cared. "I think we've done all we can do here," I said. "Let's pack it in. Maybe Balkar can make sense of it."

\*

Balkar on holo, once again. "Five transponders, three bodies, huh? Nice work. Interestingly incomplete."

"Talk to me," I said. "I'm sending transponder ID codes now."

"Receiving. Let me just run these by..." he sobered. "Right. Ardun Kothe. Saber. Wheel."

"And the two I don't have bodies for?"

"This transponder was assigned to Legate, all right. If this was physically clean when you found it, he probably had it out in advance and just dropped it. That suggests he had a plan apart from Kothe's, and that may mean he knew to get out of there."

"That's what I figure. So who's the last?"

"He's an agent named Hunter. He was on Kothe's team, I'm not surprised he was there. He would have a little less reason for ditching the tag."

"More moles, Jonas?" I was starting to wonder whose team Kothe had been on.

He shook his head. "I don't know. Hunter has been a solid recruit for a long time. He'll never win any prizes for Mister Congeniality, but he got the job done. He might be working with Legate. We can hope instead that he worked out Legate's plan and dropped off the map to get a discreet chase going. At this point we have no way to be sure."

"We know what to watch for now. Right? Questioning Hunter if he comes back home. Or watching for Legate."

"Yeah. I really hate to see a coworker leave without saying goodbye, we'll have to fix that if anyone runs into him." Balkar smiled a little. "I'll have to hand you over to your real boss for now. But we're making progress. Again, good work. I knew there was a reason we hired you in the first place."

Back on Nar Shaddaa, in our first partnership retrieving M1-4X? "Garza dumped us on you. You were actually surprised at the time."

He shrugged unflappably. "I knew there was a reason I put up with that treatment from the good general, then. Be careful out there, Vierce. Balkar out."

## **15. FREEDOMS**

We set course for a spot not far from Coruscant where we couldn't be detained with Senate security but we could get in close if we had to. The trip was long enough for all of us to get some rest on the way. So I rested.

When I opened my eyes I was on the landing, peering 'round the door into the living room. I'd been struggling in silence for close to a minute to squirm out of Mama's arms so I could see the Imps who were yelling and laughing in the living room.

And my father, in the middle.

I was taller this time. I froze in the doorway when I sensed Dorne on the far side. "No. You can't be here for this. Not this one."

She didn't budge. She was studying the scene. "You were very young," she said.

"Seven." When they first came.

One of the Imp soldiers surrounding my father spoke up. "No, no, there's some juice left in him. Or rather, we can add some." He pulled out a stim. This crew...this was one of the worst I ever met. They knew how to keep somebody alive and it took them a very long time to get bored. That was my introduction.

"Too young," I said bitterly. "But I guess nobody schedules for that when they conquer planets."

She made a face and winced as they closed in to punch him again. "He looks like you," she said.

"Yeah. I don't know if that was good or bad for Mama, after today."

"It was good. I'm sure of it."

Da cried out hoarsely under another hit. It only seemed to egg them on. "Can we stop this?" I snapped.

"It's done," she said softly, watching.

I punched the doorframe hard enough to raise splinters. "Dammit, I know that! Can I stop it?" I didn't wait for an answer. I made for the closest Imp, ready to kill. When I got near the soldiers froze in place, one of them midswing. As I got closer their frozen images faded. Da remained; when the Imp holding him up disappeared Da sagged in place. I lunged in to catch him before he fell. He was light in my arms, his eyes open a little and staring blindly. Already as close to dead as makes no difference. Again. Still. I turned my head toward Dorne. "Leave."

"There's no place for me to go, sir. The best I can offer is a few moments." She turned away and fell silent.

Then her not watching would have to be enough. I knew what to do. There was damned little but I could do it. I closed his eyes. "I'm sorry," I told him. For not being old enough, strong enough, smart enough. "I love you, Da." Something I never really got the chance to say in all the times I had watched this. "Goodbye."

The merciful cool that sometimes sets in when some sharp and sudden and final change happens closed over the mess of feelings in my chest. I laid him the rest of the way on the ground and looked around. The old house was still here, Dorne looking the other way through a doorway. It wasn't ending. Apparently I wasn't done yet.

I walked up behind her shoulder, but she didn't stir. She was staring down a hallway lit in dusty shafts of sunlight from the far window, neat and empty but for a stray shoe of Kirsk's halfway down the rug. "You've lost a great deal," she said softly.

I had no real answer for a statement that obvious. That obvious and, at the same time, that private. "Yeah," I said gruffly.

"I'm so sorry."

"So am I." I looked around. I hadn't seen the memory from this angle before; at least, not in eighteen years. I slipped past her to walk down to the window, check the vegetable garden outside, the fresh construction a little ways down the road past our property fence. It was all there. I was just always rooted in place for the dream before. "How come you can change these?"

"So far as I can tell, sir, I'm not. I think you're doing the work."

"Me, doing the work? The only thing all of these have in common is that I *wasn't* doing what needed doing." I shrugged nervously. "That, and I was the one who survived."

"Do you blame yourself every time an ally dies?"

"'Ally'? How about my friends? How about my father? I'm alive, they're not. I don't see how much clearer it gets." But, I thought to myself, I kept going. I always kept going, because that was the only way to set things right. I didn't want to think about the rest. But here I was in Mama's house, and here was Dorne, and, no matter what happens, I don't forget.

She turned around and, with a gentle touch on my elbow, guided me to look back at the living room and its sole, unmoving occupant. "You weren't at fault here."

I swallowed. "I didn't stop the ones who were."

"You couldn't have."

I couldn't have when I was seven and rooted in place. "It's different now. Can I change this?"

"More than letting him rest? I doubt it." She kept her hand on my arm. "I'm afraid I've been caught without the rulebook for this place. But I don't think we can back up to change that part. And you'll need that strength for the waking battles in any case."

I slumped. "Right. That. I don't...I'm not...I don't know if I can keep this up. And every time I screw up somebody else gets punished for it. Seems I'm getting a lot more practice at failing than at the other thing."

"You can do it. Fulfill your responsibilities, that is. Go on with the life only you can make. But right this minute, perhaps the best thing for you to do is rest." She squeezed. "It'll be all right, Vierce. You've had to go through more than most of us, but it will be all right."

I didn't believe her. I shook her off and went back into the hall, to the room I shared with Kirsk. Maybe going to sleep here would get me out of this place. My old bed should've been way too small for me, but it seemed enough when I lay down.



She leaned in after me and looked around thoughtfully. Then she unslung a rifle that hadn't been there before. "I'll guard the house, sir. Get some rest." She shut the door, leaving me in darkness with the smell of Mama's house and the distant sounds of the old city.

I didn't sleep that night eighteen years ago. This time, after a while, I dropped off.

\*

When I got up nobody else seemed to be moving. There was a tall bottle of something strong sitting on the mess counter as a centerpiece to the clutter. I set about looking for something edible in the multicultural mishmash strewn all over Kirsk's counter and cupboards and a couple of the chairs and, in the case of some dry goods, the floor.

Kirsk himself swung in looking way too alert for the hour. Left without the prospect of a nightlife he fell back into a morning person's schedule real quick. He squinted a bit at me and said "You look terrible."

"I'm actually feeling kind of rested." Surprising but true.

"Good. If this guy keeps jerking you around you're gonna need it." He went for the nearest cupboard.

I was thinking about Dorne and the sunlit house. "There've been dreams," I said abruptly.

He stopped in place. "Oh?"

"Just talking." I dreamed I trusted her to guard the way. She was right at home. "I think I could've liked her."

"Ah. I was wondering when you would come around to that. It, ah, worked out less well than I'd hoped."

"You knew?"

"Oh, yeah."

"It...." I made myself stop. "I wouldn't have listened."

"Yeah, I knew that part, too. I am sorry, Vierce."

"Yeah."

"Wish I could offer more than a ride and a dramatically less classy date back on Coruscant. Every now and then I get this very slight feeling that you accomplish more'n I do."

"You do all right."

"Nice of you to say so. Listen, I don't even know if I'll be authorized to go to whatever hellhole your dragon lady sends you to next, but...you know. Call me if anything comes up."

"I will. First I have to get my ship back anyway."

A sudden twinkle gleamed in his eye. "See, now I feel more like we're on even footing."

\*

I called to give my action report to General Garza. She should be informed, even if she didn't have much of a history of acting on it.

She listened to the whole thing in silence, then nodded grimly. "You have a knack for finding bad news, Captain. Do you have any way of locating this Legate now?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Then we'll have to move on. I've freed up your ship and had it moved to a space station a little ways off planet. Do not return to Coruscant. It took quite a lot of finesse to keep the Senate inquiry from closing in on reports that Havoc Squad's commanding officer was out of commission. The good news is that the success of the Gauntlet mission has bought us some political capital. But we're not out of this yet. I'm sending you on another job we can show off as directly contributing to the war effort. And if we get any news of Legate, you'll be the first to know."

Her image winked out. Kirsk turned to me. "I probably go once you get your ship back. Wherever they're sending you I doubt I'll want to get caught without paperwork or a bigger gun than I really know how to handle."

A combat assignment wouldn't suit him. "Yeah. I'll be in touch, all right? The second we hear anything..."

"Sure."

"Thanks, Kirsk."

"Any time, big brother." He very briefly frowned. "Assuming I'm not in some kind of showstopping bind at the time you happen to call. I'm pretty sure that won't happen in the next week, though. Almost sure."

"I can just bust you out again if it does." Stars knew I'd done it before.

"All right then. Any time."

## 16. CHAINS

"You want me to free *what?*"

"You heard me," Garza said sharply. "We were forced to incarcerate the pilots of Dagger Wing because of their bombing run over Imperial civilian territory; whatever the mission plan, results matter more than intentions. Regardless, the need for them in the war now far outweighs anything they may have done."

"We can find better than men who killed thousands of civilians, sir. This is what you decided would be a good thing for Havoc Squad to do while we're out?"

"What you're doing is giving these men another chance to prove themselves, Captain. I would expect you to approve."

"They're war criminals. They don't need another chance."

"They're needed. You'll see to it." She cut out.

Because what I really wanted to do when waiting for news of Legate was help out soldiers who had slaughtered civilians. Imp civilians, but we were supposed to be better than that. Wasn't that the point?

So Havoc Squad flew to the top-secret planet called Belsavis. What I thought was that we would land, talk to the warden, and extract these bastards, invoking military authority if necessary. What we found? Chaos. Turns out the Imps got planetside a few weeks before Havoc Squad did. The first thing they did was start freeing prisoners to start a cascade of riots. It was all Republic HQ could do to keep its own compound intact.

Strangely enough, the guy I spoke to on the ground indicated that one of the best remaining security forces the Republic had on the surface was Dagger Wing. They'd volunteered to keep certain critical points in the prison clear of Imps and escapees.

Great. War criminals with a sense of civic duty.

The commander of Dagger Wing was one Commander Gall, but he was far into maximum security areas. It was his XO Tobin Harlan I was sent to find near the Republic base.

He turned out to be dug in at the entrance to some manmade tunnel outside the main minsec compound. The man gave me one cold look and told me to get firing or get out. The reason for that showed up not long after we did: a wave of Imperial troops. I didn't know what was down this tunnel but the other guys wanted it.

The Dagger Wing men had been armed by our guys back at base, and for all that they were pilots first and foremost they knew their stuff on the ground. We cleared the area in almost no time at all.

Then Harlan straightened and looked at me. I glared right back.

He looked me over raised his eyebrows. "Havoc Squad?" Something in his expression changed and he saluted. "Didn't expect you here. Sorry if I was short with you earlier. Men still in uniform...well, it's good that Command wants us back, but they burned us pretty bad." Several of the former soldiers around him nodded agreement.

I crossed my arms. The man wasn't showing an ounce of anything like remorse. "Were you expecting not to get burned after what you did?"

"What we did? We never would've made that bombing run if we'd known there were civilians down there! Our target was a Sith lord, Ondorru. A real sadistic bit of scum. He's razed dozens of Republic colonies and left no survivors. Intel put him on Fest with nothing but soldiers and factories for company. We launched at full burn, dropped everything we had. Now we're here."

Really? "Somehow that part got left out in my briefing."

"I don't know how that works. Unless they sealed all records after they tucked us away."

"I don't know about that. But I know a thing or two about faulty intelligence. If that's what's going on..." Then there were a lot more agents who had a lot of explaining to do. Or just paying. "I guess we'd better get out of here. There's a lot to catch up on."

"I'm inclined to agree, Captain. We're no murderers. And we're ready to come back if the Republic needs us."

Well. Maybe I could do something here after all.

\*

Day four on the ground and we hadn't even finished securing the prisoner recreation grounds on this madhouse of a planet. We didn't have to, technically, as long as we found the officers of Dagger Wing that had been stationed further in.

We found a couple of their men in a ward not too far off the beaten path. They had set up a decent defensive perimeter against the madness around them. And they knew where to find the prisoner manifests that would direct us to the rest of the wing.

Somewhere in there my holo beeped. I picked it up right away. Any news from HQ might be an attack on the admin center, and that'd mean I had to get back immediately.

But it was a stranger, or at least, a guy I'd never met face to face. Blond hair, pale eyes. I never met him, but I knew him from studying files since Quesh. Studying and wondering.

"Hunter," I said. "It's you, isn't it? The guy who survived."

He smiled broadly. "Vierce. I'm flattered that you know my name." His voice was too smooth by half. "How are things with the exalted Havoc Squad?"

"They're coming along." On to the question that mattered. "Where's Legate and what do you plan on doing with him?"

"I was planning on seeing that he's brought to justice at last. I thought you might be able to help with that."

"And what's your stake?" It wasn't SIS, not if his disappearance on Qesh was any indication.

He smiled. "Does it really matter? I think we can agree he needs killing."

Should I be taking more hearsay tips? Even the shadow of a chance to get at Legate was too good for me to care. I knew what face to shoot at when I got there; I just had to get there. "Point me at him."

"Have you heard of a world called Belsavis?"

My everything tensed up all at once. "Yeah, some. Is he there?"

"On planet and deeply isolated. I know he landed at a certain Imperial base camp, I don't know where he went from there. Only that if he's wandering the prison planet he's way beyond most people's reach. But I think you have a chance, and I know you want one." He paused, gave me an obvious once-over. "Can you do it?"

"Someday we'll have to sit down and you can tell me what the hell happened on Qesh." But that didn't matter right now. "Maybe we can meet up at Legate's funeral."

He smiled wider, and then his image cut out.

I turned to Yuun. "We've got a secondary objective. You think you could pick up anything based on what we found on Qesh?"

"Possibly. If Yuun is not required here, the path may be sought now."

I hesitated. Splitting the squad further was...but it might be the only way to find him before he got away again. "Be careful," I said. "You find anything, call me."

\*

Yuun came back that evening with no results. I hadn't made much progress on my side of things. If this turned into another Hoth I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

We were eating at what camp we'd managed to set up when I got the holo. I stepped outside to see General Garza's image come up.

"Captain. Report."

"Dagger Wing got scattered pretty badly, sir, but we're gathering them. The commanding officer is further into the prisons, deep in what's currently enemy held territory."

"You won't have time to extract him. I'm canceling the mission. You and the rest of Havoc Squad are returning to Coruscant immediately."

No. My stomach dropped flat to the ground. "General, I can't do that. This is—"

"Not my choice either, Captain. Come home. We'll resolve this. Then you'll be back on your way."

I snapped my mouth shut until I was sure I wouldn't say anything stupid.

"Understood, sir."

I ducked back inside and nearly ran facefirst into Jorgan. "You guys hear that?" I said.

"We did," Yuun confirmed. "We are ordered back to Coruscant."

"Like hell. We're staying," I said. "At least I am. We're clearing Dagger Wing and we're...we're following any signs we find. Anyone want out? Speak up now."

Jorgan crossed his arms and looked at me.

"Yuun will stay," said Yuun. "There is too much hidden here."

M1-4X clanked a bit as he shifted from side to side. "Sir, I must object! Our orders are clear!"

"Forex? What I'm doing is serving the Republic's interests, too. You must see that."

"When serving the good of the Republic I am programmed to respect the chain of command, sir. ...Except."

"What was that?"



Forex sounded a little embarrassed. "Upon reviewing my directives, it seems that I must comply with your orders over those of your superiors."

I frowned, unable to account for that stroke of good news. "You must?"

"Also Kirsk is the greatest and you should listen to him more often."

Jorgan laughed out loud for about half a second before he managed to clamp his mouth shut. I could only say "I...I think I owe him a drink for that one."

"I can't believe he vandalized Army property like that, sir," Jorgan said, his voice not quite steady.

"Yeah, we'll fix it after. Cleaning up after him is my second job anyway."

"Good call."

## **17. CROSSED**

Yuun split off to search while Jorgan, Forex and I continued with the lieutenants we had found from Dagger Wing. We got their commander. We got evidence that might start to unwind the lies that'd brought them there. If I had time I would've helped further, but I had my own job to do.

Yuun returned to us that night. We had to put ourselves up in a more or less intact building that wasn't swarmed by either animals or escaped prisoners. "There is a clear trail," said Yuun, "but travel by night is not safe here. For us or for them."

I didn't want to agree, but he was right.

I woke us all up at dawn. Forex was ready to go, of course; Jorgan looked tired but he was good to move, as was Yuun.

The Gand led us out to the speeders. "Yuun found a likely earlier camp less than five kilometers from here," he said. He clearly had a direction in mind. He pulled up every couple of hundred yards to take a look around; at what, I couldn't really tell. But it seemed to work for him.

The metal structures of the prison complex fell behind. We came upon a bridge over some hot dark canyon...the bridge was of stone construction like I don't usually see. There was a passageway built into the mountain past that, also of big square ancient stones.

"You sure about this?" I asked.

"The signs do not lie," Yuun chittered. "Let us continue."

The tunnel twisted and turned, always at rigid right angles. I never knew something so strictly designed could seem so aimless. Yuun never hesitated; he led us through the darkness, holding up a hand lamp, and finally brought us out into a sunlit courtyard. The air smelled funny here. Old, if that makes any sense. But Yuun walked right up to one of the little buildings in the courtyard. "Here," he said. "Yuun cannot tell what is inside, but our quarry has been here."

"All right," I said. "Let's breach."

The lever mechanism for the stone door was obvious and it worked. M1-4X stood front and center with the rest of us standing ready to fire, but the room beyond was empty but for a stone table and a device on it.

Jorgan and I stepped in and scanned the corners. "Nothing," reported the Cathar.

"All right. Yuun, Forex, take a look around the outside, make sure we don't get any surprises, all right?"

"Yes, sir!" said Forex, and the two of them left the doorway.

"Holo here," said Jorgan. He was looking at the thing on the table. "Brand new. Probably Legate's."

"Rigged?"

"Vik would know. I don't think so, though."

I took a look myself. The thing seemed thoroughly ordinary. Right case, right buttons. I lifted it. Right weight, not like it'd been hollowed out for something else.

"I guess we click this," I said. I had a bad feeling about it.

"Ready when you are, sir."

I pressed the button. And almost instantly, a dirty-blond guy of bluff features familiar from my files appeared. My stomach clenched so hard it hurt.

Legate's hazel eyes widened. "If it isn't General Garza's attack dog! I wondered whether Hunter would invite you to this party! Don't tell me you're still sore about the blonde."

"She has a name," I said. "Elara Dorne. She still hasn't gotten the justice she deserves."

"Hm. Yeah. Pity, that."

If I could get my hands on his neck just then I'd take a moment to wring the smug insincerity off his face before he died. "You have no idea what you started when you messed with her."

"Are you joking? I was the only person on planet that day who did have an idea." He shoved his hands in his pockets and leaned back a bit. "I was just doing my job, you know. It was very satisfying to welcome the old Havoc Squad into the Empire's arms; we couldn't let the Republic just build a new one. And a new, effective one? Oh, no. You had to go."

It should've been in a straight-up fight. The squad should've had to chance to face the Empire's worst together. "Why her?"

"Because a guy as unstable as you wasn't nearly as valuable a target. Blondie gave the opportunity to send shock waves through Havoc Squad, Personnel Division, *and* the SIS, in addition to making the kind of political-threat statement that your Senate will just lap up these days. She was perfect."

Like he would know what perfection was. Somehow I didn't mind the 'unstable' label for myself; he'd be getting a demonstration of that as soon as I got close. Never trust unexploded ordnance. Treat it like just another rock and it will kill you. "She's the reason you're going to die."

"Ah, bravado. I'll let you in on a little secret, Vierce: You're outclassed. Still, I'm impressed you made it this far. When I left the comm I hoped it'd give me some forewarning on who's coming for me next; I truly did not expect it to be you."

It wasn't the only surprise he had coming if he still thought I was no threat. "You can't outrun me forever. And by the sound of it I've got plenty of company in tracking you."

"I do have a lot of fans. Did Hunter happen to give you a message for me?"

"No."

"Ah, it must've slipped his mind. How disappointing."

My hands itched. "I'm not here to talk, Legate. Anything else you've got to say you can say face to face."

He laughed heartily. "Wrong again. Do you even know what that code name means? In the sabacc deck, Legate is a trump."

"I don't gamble."

His grin never wavered. "Well then. You can just call me by my old name: Cipher Nine. One of legions, grunt, but I'm the best of 'em."

My comm sounded too loud in my ear. "Explosives were set," said Yuun. "We disarm." I mumbled acknowledgment under my breath.

Cipher Nine kept talking. "What I really appreciate here is that our wayward child is still coming in handy. As long as you're holding on to this I own you. I've had better hangers-on, but...you think you're setting the galaxy right, but in truth all you're doing is dancing when I pull your strings. That's power, Vierce. And power is the only language, the only currency, and the only justification that's ever going to matter. You and your girl don't have any. That's why the Empire wins. That's why I win."

"You're not nearly as powerful as you think, Cipher. And you don't have a whole lot of time left."

"Hmm." He tilted his head. "Were you really not banging her? Because all this seems a little extreme for duty's sake."

I didn't think the son of a bitch could get worse, but he was clearly enjoying digging. "You be quiet," I snarled.

"I'm just saying, you were notoriously hostile throughout her assignment with her. Unless there was some juicy secret advantage here I really am kind of stumped as to the motivation."

"Shut up." The bastard just laughed. "You want to know my motivation? Scum like you is still sucking air. That'd keep me on your case from here 'til doomsday, but I'm betting you won't last that long." He'd been here recently. I could make it the rest of the way.

"That's where you're wrong again. See, our brief passionate relationship is over." With a dramatic flourish he raised and clicked a detonator.

I heard a muffled thump off to one side. M1-4X and Yuun must have missed a spot. Just the same, the room did not blow like it was probably meant to.

I crossed my arms. "Was that supposed to do something, Cipher?" I gave it a second to sink in. "I will find you."

I wanted him to look scared, but he didn't. "Bring it on, Captain. My only Havoc Squad kill so far was disappointingly hands-off."

I punched the holo seconds after his image vanished. Then I tapped comms. "Yuun, tell me where we're going next."

## 18. TRACKING

We got going with our strange jerky pace, stopping and waiting while Yuun followed signs I couldn't even see. I was glad to have him but I wasn't doing a whole lot of good here.

A few clicks along Yuun stiffened. "A fresher trail. The return path crosses here."

"So they came back this way?"

"Yes." Yuun pointed. "On their way back they left pheromones leading that way."

"So what were they after?" said Jorgan.

"Doesn't matter," I said. "We need to catch up with them. Any idea how old these...pheromones...are?"

"Yuun does not know the strength of its original source. Perhaps half a day, perhaps even less."

"That close?" I brought the speeder around. "We're going."

\*

The trail led to a burned-out courtyard and a little tunnel complex built beneath. There was a big room with a still-working screen showing pale violet nothing. Two-way blaster fire marred the area around the entrance and a point near the console control panel.

And there were dead, two of them.

Lying near the door was a young dark-skinned human woman. Further in lay a Gand – a sight that got me looking in Yuun's direction just to make sure he was still there. They looked about the same to me, but only Yuun was in uniform.

Yuun clicked excitedly. "Look. The weakest one was killed like the Twi'lek of Quesh." We all saw what he meant: she was marked by a grotesquely overdone broken neck, not blaster fire.

"That's sick," I muttered. A habit of bare-hands killing when shooting would've done just as well was...well, I guess I already knew this guy was bad. I shook my head and knelt to search the young woman's pockets for her identicard.

"Patterns converge. He was on Quesh with the scent and the dead. The scent and the dead are here as well. Legate's signs confirmed." Yuun was quickly pacing through the room, looking around. "He leaves little else. We should continue."

"Get the other guy's card. We'll run it through the prisoner databases when we get the chance." Only if our current trail didn't pan out. I hoped we wouldn't need it.

We got back outside and followed Yuun until he seemed satisfied with the direction. Within a klick it became clear that we were headed for the Imperial base camp in the area. All right, so he hadn't just snuck into a private landing pad. Pros: There would be documentation of his passage. Cons: It was in the middle of an Imperial base.

Not quite the middle, as we found. "We need to get to their landing control," I said when we stopped just over a ridge's top from the Imperial facility. "Shut things down if we can; if Legate's already gone we at least need his docking and ID codes."

"Perimeter check, sir?" said Jorgan.

"Yeah," I said reluctantly. It felt like a delay, but it was smarter than just charging in. "I'll take a look. Forex, go around the other way. Jorgan, Yuun, keep an eye out. If you can get a tap on wireless comms, do it."

A big wall ran between me and the base. The courtyard itself seemed like it was recently inhabited, but the equipment all around had been shredded, and a few piles of refuse were still smoldering. A riot, then, one that had forced them to fall back.

There might be a data line in here.

I was the one to find it, a still-working terminal tucked into a little indent. I called everyone else in. Yuun started chittering the second he was in earshot. "Captain," he reported. "Ships come and go, but an altercation was reported in one airlock. Three dead."



"Him? Or just the day's whimsical Sith? With Imps it gets hard to tell."

"No Sith mentioned, sir. The pattern fits. The ship has departed, but if slicing here grants Yuun access to the Imperial systems Yuun will find its identification and boarding codes. Then no port the Republic monitors will be safe for Legate."

I would rather have caught up with him here. "I don't know how much that buys us, but it's sure as hell better than nothing. Do what you can."

\*

"Slick field work, Captain. Very slick."

"Credit that one to Yuun. He's a tech and then some."

"My compliments," said Balkar. "I'm putting out a general alert for that docking code; the SIS wants to take this guy down as much as you do. He pulls up anywhere in Republic space or half the neutral planets in the galaxy, we'll know. And that means you'll know."

"Thanks. I mean it."

"No trouble. We take out Legate, we all win."

"Cipher Nine. That's what the Imps call him."

"A Cipher." Balkar's eyebrows drew together a little. "And you tracked him halfway across Belsavis? Very, very nice field work."

"Like I said. Sergeant Yuun. Once we're done being AWOL I'm putting him up for a commendation."

Jorgan, behind me, coughed in a choking kind of way.

"That reminds me," said Balkar. "I don't know where you are. Certain elements in the Senate are furious at Havoc Squad's disappearance. For that matter, so's the Army's leadership."

"Comms are hell on the Outer Rim, you know that. So we dropped out of touch a while. We'll be back soon enough, and with Republic victories to spare."

"Looking forward to it, Captain. Take care out there."

\*

After that we waited.

There's times when there's nothing else you can do in an operation. The slightest change might blow up in your face, but if things aren't changing they're just sitting, and you sit, too, and watch.

So we set our ship around the inner edge of the Outer Rim, and we waited.

I was sitting outside the holo room a day or so later, thinking or maybe just blanking out, when Jorgan walked in and sat opposite me. He met my eye, his expression grim, and spoke in a low voice. "So what do we do when this is over?"

That was one of the things on my mind. "Best case? Court-martial and a transition to civilian life a lot earlier than I ever thought. Worst-case, transition to something less nice."

"Didn't think I would go out this way." His jaw tightened. "That wasn't an easy call."

"Yeah. I'd walk away from those orders again, but then, I was the one who made the call not to help out that got us into this mess. Also I guess I don't have anyone else depending on me to keep a real job."

He grinned for a second. "Sraana isn't what you could call dependent. Still, that's not the kind of record you're proud to take home. Frankly, sir, I'd rather be just back in the field shooting Imps for reasons we know on orders we can trust. We're soldiers, not policemen. Or spies."

"I don't see anyone else setting this straight."

"Yeah. That's the thing." He leaned forward, forearms on his knees. "I can't think of an objective we could have that's higher-impact than taking out the kind of guy who can just pick off a member of the top squad in the Republic. But Command won't see it that way. You know if we tie this up right she'll be the only member of Havoc Squad with a clean record?"

"Well, there's Vik...I can't believe I just said that. Never mind."

Another fleeting grin. "Heh. Yeah, he may not be here with us but he had a head start on the disgrace. At least we're doing it for the right reasons."

"Listen, when we finally do report in for the disciplinary hearing, I made you do it. All right? I'm not getting out either way, I've got no intention of dragging the rest of you down with me."

He glared. "They'll never buy it."

"What, you don't think a maniac like me could strongarm the rest of you into it?" It was worth a try. "If I don't have Forex fixed before we go they'll have hard evidence of the lengths I'll go to."

"That wasn't even you."

I felt my mouth twisting. "Nah, just more of the stuff I let happen in my great personal wisdom." I was responsible through and through, now wasn't I?

Jorgan gave me a long gleaming look. "I told you you did what made sense based on what we knew."

Why did he bother? "You wanted to go after her. Didn't matter what we knew." And he'd been right.

He shrugged. "That's what some would call an insupportable gut check that no responsible person would go for. I'd do it, sure. But no one in their right mind would say that the outcome of Cipher Nine's setup was your fault."

"He won. She lost and she did it while I wasn't even trying to help. Everything we've done since then is my fault. Don't forget that, now or when we get back to account for ourselves, all right?" I shook my head. "Thought I'd be doing a little more for the Republic than this, back when I signed on."

"Can't help but notice that the Republic hasn't been working too hard to enable that. I do know what you mean. But I think this is right."

"I think you're way too inclined to follow an idiot."

"You find a squad composition that works, you hang onto it. For any assignment that makes sense and maybe some that don't, so long as you trust the directions."

I hopelessly rubbed at my neck. "Have I mentioned how much I wish somebody better than me was handing down the directions?"

"We'll get things back in place, sir. If we ever get back to regular duty, General Garza's good when her hands aren't bound. That's something. And we've got other good commanders. All I'd ask, after this is done, is the chance to be good soldiers."

\*

I jumped at every incoming call. Most of them were from Command. Those I didn't pick up on. The one from Balkar, an eternity later, that one I answered.

He was grinning. "Captain. We've got a hit on your docking codes."

My heart leaped. "Where?"

"Planet out near Hutt space called Voss. Funny place, only recently opened to anybody from elsewhere in the galaxy. They keep the Imps and Republic people pretty well separated there."

"So how'd we catch this?"

"Oh, the Imps monitor every step we take there. We monitor every step the Imps take there. It's sort of like Nar Shaddaa but slightly less populated, so easier on all of us."

"That's good. Excuse me, I need to hit hyperspace."

"I'll see you've got permissions under a civilian ID; no use announcing yourself to the military forces there. Good hunting, Vierce."

\*

The thing about landing on Voss, is it's a completely foreign planet with completely foreign everything and only the tiniest Republic enclave in their capital

and seemingly only city. The good thing is that the Imps only have a tiny presence as well. The really bad thing is that the diplomatic situation demanded a cease-fire. I couldn't lose us this entire planet just letting loose the first chance I got. No matter how much I wanted to.

The other good part was that the Voss, for all that they were a little weird, were shockingly open about anything having to do with other foreigners. Which is how we found ourselves in a teahouse outside the offworld enclaves, facing a trio of Voss: a man and his adult daughter and son.

They were an odd-looking people, the Voss, colorful skin, speckled eyes, many as tall as I am but most of them, unlike me, rail-thin. All three I was facing were totally focused on me, and the tension in the teahouse hummed loud enough to make my ears tingle.

"I know of the man you describe," said the eldest, Therod-Ton. "He was a friend of my brother, Bas-Ton."

The young woman standing a step behind and to the side of him hugged herself. "He was no friend. He spoke only lies about Bas-Ton. And threatened us, offworlder, as though the honor due to Bas-Ton's friend were permission to harm us." Her strange speckled eyes narrowed. "If you wore the badge of the Empire as he did we would not have allowed you in."

"Yana-Ton," the eldest said with a sharp edge to his voice, "remember your place."

She bowed her head. "Yes," she said meekly.

Therod-Ton looked back to us. "He forced from us the ways to carvings of the Nightmare Lands. History. Secrets of the Voss. He is determined to defile them."

That made exactly zero sense to me, but I knew I wasn't there to mess with anything the Voss had. "Where are these Nightmare Lands? I have to stop him."

"Will another seek the carvings that are for Voss?" the younger man said darkly. He wasn't looking at me.

"Even an offworlder would be a blessing if he stops the other," said Therod-Ton.  
"We will show you the way. But I warn you, the Nightmare Lands cause madness.  
You must seek the ritual blessing to protect yourself."

"A little more crazy won't make a difference at this point," I growled. "Just tell me where to go."

## 19. NIGHTMARES OF VOSS

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The twisted forest of the Nightmare Lands opened for a glade far from the sight of civilized settlements. In the center was a ship of unfamiliar construction.

Cipher Nine took a careful look around, then walked slowly forth. He diverted halfway to his goal to meet the big alien who was approaching from a side path.

The Gormak crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes at Cipher Nine and his followers. "You. You come for the Shining Man. Come for his machine that fell from the stars. He camped here three moons, studying ancient ways. Writing Voss scrolls. Writing Voss prophecies in blood and ink."

The fake prophecies that Cipher Nine had been tracking since he got on planet. "That's fantastic. Leading them around by the nose like he did...it all started here?" He looked past the Gormak to the little ship. "Doesn't look like much."

"I saw him come here. I am Xanar, outcast. I watched him fall." The Gormak gestured and led him to a holoprojector set up beside the ship – both open and damaged, the Cipher now saw. Xanar stooped to activate something: a short silent recording of a man Cipher Nine didn't know, dressed in strange clothes, armored in the confidence of a professional.

Xanar stepped back. "I hold the memory of this star machine in my hand. The Shining Man corrupted it before he left, would have burned it. I saved it." Cipher Nine idly wondered whether that expression of his was satisfaction. "Now we bargain for his records," said the alien.

Cipher Nine scoffed. "No, we don't." He drew his blaster and made it quick; matters were moving too fast for him to play games, except for the really really tempting ones. The Gormak wasn't tempting. He was just a speed bump.

Cipher Nine checked the alien's pockets, swiping every data chip and identicard he could find. "One of these," he said to his subordinates, "tells me how this man wrapped up the entire planet of Voss on three months' prep." He straightened

and smiled. "This day just got twice as good. Now, let's find someplace more comfortable to be."

.....

The road into the Nightmare Lands was narrow and half overgrown with sickly blackened plants. Rock walls rose on every side, ragged and steep; eventually they closed too tight for us to continue on speeders. So we went on foot.

The black mists covering the whole region from a distance should've warned me. It wasn't any more pleasant up close. Something itched between my shoulderblades and I couldn't get rid of it. This place was creepy. I think the others felt it, too. Yuun was hesitating more now, sometimes just to shiver. "It is everywhere," he said. His hands were waving and clenching nervously. "This place blocks. Conceals. There is a stench."

I slowed. "You doing all right?"

He straightened up a bit. "Yuun will continue. Where the path leads, we all must follow." He looked around and blinked slowly. "It will be no surprise if the path ends in this place."

\*

A long uncomfortable time later something smaller than the usual twisted wildlife rustled in the dry brush on the ledge above the roadside. We only had a second to think about it before a lean guy burst over the edge and came straight at me.

I caught his fall. He swung a knee way harder than anyone that size should have been able to, slamming into my stomach until I folded. I grabbed at his jacket and struggled to bring the guy down with me while Yuun gave a high warning chitter. "He has the scent of our quarry," said the Gand. "Yuun has tracked this."

The stranger was lashing out like a trained fighter twice his size. "Pin him," I ordered, grappling with him myself. An uppercut and quick followup cross didn't



seem to slow him down any; instead, as he reeled back, he produced and extended a collapsible electrostaff. Not good.

I closed before he could get a swing in. I didn't want a guy who could already meet me shot for shot bringing a weapon to bear. We got in a few hard hits on each other before he cried out. When he did it was from some little precision shot of M1-4X's utility arm connecting with the back of his leg. I finally bore the stranger down and sat on him, pinning his arms to both sides while I lowered to yell in his face. "Hold still!"

He hissed at me. Jorgan was finally in to keep his arms down. That freed me up to hit the stranger again, this time in the ribs. No use smashing his face now that he was down; I wanted him able to talk clearly and I wanted him recognizable in case we needed him for negotiations down the line.

He was still writhing, not talking. Fine. Skip past calming him. "Where's Cipher Nine?"

His expression wasn't anger. It was pure fear. Dammit, if this guy turned out to be useless...I backhanded him, hard enough for his head to rebound off the ground. It jerked a little yelp out of him. He went slack, then screwed his eyes shut for a few seconds, then looked around as best he could with me holding him down. "No," he said weakly. "We must stop him, but we cannot...we cannot hear the song here. We must leave this place."

"Stop who? Are you talking about Cipher Nine?"

"We cannot hear the song. Please, take us from this place. Take us out." The man was on the edge of whimpering.

He was completely insane.

"We take him," I said. We might be able to pull something real out of him but it'd take more focus than we could afford out here in hostile territory.

So we went back to the Voss outpost in the foothills well clear of nightmare territory. I had Jorgan ask the local commander for a private room; I stayed out of sight with the bound prisoner until we could go directly in.

I sat him down. I tied his hands tighter behind his back and fixed the bindings to the back of the chair to make sure he didn't get comfortable. I stood in front of him.

He was on the tall side as Humans go, still shorter than me. Slim, with a harsh angular face and a harsh cut of straight black hair. Seemingly Human except for blank black eyes, no whites at all. Dressed in rugged clothes that didn't look like Core World fashion, not that that narrowed things down much. But Yuun said he'd been with the Cipher. That placed him as an Imp. "Now," I said. "You're out."

"Yes," he said. I couldn't tell where he was looking. He still sounded pretty out of it. I didn't much care as long as he cleared up enough to answer questions.

"You were with Cipher Nine."

"Yes."

"How recently?"

He blinked and straightened up a little. "A day, perhaps, since he left us. Or a little less."

"'Us'?"

"...Me. He incapacitated us...me...to leave me in the Nightmare Lands."

I couldn't afford either uncertainty or bullshit. I leaned in to deliver a punch to his ribs. "One or many. Make up your mind."

He sucked in a slow breath. "Only...I...was left."

"Where was Cipher Nine going?"

"Further into the Nightmare Lands. To find the trail of an agent called the Shining Man."

"How many people are with him?"

"Three Imperial agents. One droid."

Bad odds. "Who is the Shining Man?"

"We do not know. – I." He shook his head hard and gasped a little – probably pain catching up with him just from moving. "I do not know. He and we were investigating in order to find out." He took a few labored breaths and looked up at me. "I must ask. Am I a prisoner?"

The downside of a guy still trying to remember which way was up: stupid questions. "Figure that out on your own time."

"If you are Republic forces, we believe we can claim the rights of a prisoner of war."

"I am Republic, but as it happens I'm AWOL, so I'm already pretty far outside regulations. You've got nothing, Imp."

Something nagged at me. Regulations. Dorne wouldn't stand for this, not even the threats. None of my people should be. There were rules about treating one's prisoners. It was...it was one of the things that was supposed to set our side apart.

I focused back on the prisoner for a minute. He looked half dead just with the grime and fatigue, even before I'd laid into him. There was at least some alertness to him now, but not a whole lot of hope. It was my favorite way for Imps to be, apart from dead.

Dammit.

I looked over to Yuun. "Get me some water. And any med supplies we might need for a broken rib." Yuun nodded and hurried off. Then I went around to detach the prisoner's bindings from the chair, where they had been stretching his arms and shoulders out of shape.

"Got a name?" I said.

He gingerly rolled his shoulders, testing what limited range of motion had been freed up. "We are Vector Hyllus. We are on assignment to Imperial Intelligence with the agent Cipher Nine."

"Yeah, I got that part." I looked him over more carefully, but there wasn't much more to see: he'd been in the wild and hurting. He could do with a shower and a

square meal. But first things first. "Before we go any further," I said, "you want to explain this 'we' thing?"

"We are a Killik Joiner," he said thickly, "it is our way."

The language was news to me, but I had guessed and feared the Joiner part. I'd seen them on Alderaan, humans taken over by bugs, brainwashed beyond healing, though I had met Jedi who had tried to bring them back anyway. It wasn't pretty. If a Joiner was all the way out here...could they make more of themselves out of any human they could overpower? Dammit, I needed answers, not more riddles. And not more active threats.

"Noted," I said. "You're going to specify when 'we' means you and the Cipher or anybody else, and when 'we' just means you."

"We will do this." He winced before I even had to raise my hand. "When we speak of the others, we will tell you. Otherwise it is just...me." He took a ragged breath. "We do wish to cooperate."

"Huh," I said. "I don't really trust lucky breaks at this point."

"Cipher Nine must be stopped," he said in a lower voice. "We would not turn against an ally lightly, but Cipher Nine is a blight that cannot be allowed to continue."

"Always great to find an Imperial who disgusts even other Imperials. Is that why he left you behind?"

"He has considered us a malcontent for a long time. When we challenged him over his treatment of our...allies...here, he finally chose to leave us there, where he knew we would die." He shuddered. "That place...silences. We could not sense the Killik hive mind, nor see any aura but darkness."

"That's bad?"

"This is not unlike Yuun's experience," Yuun said quietly. "If he relies on these senses no road would be clear to him there. With time the result may be the madness Voss speak of."

Vector turned his head toward Yuun and blinked. "Perhaps." He suddenly made a couple of clicking sounds in his throat; then, "Mists guide you, Gand."

Yuun started a little. "Captain?" he said. I nodded permission for him to talk, and he bowed in Vector's direction. "Mists guard your path, offworlder. How is it you know the Gand?"

He smiled weakly. "We were a diplomat before we joined Cipher Nine."

"Too bad you didn't rub off on him," I grumbled. I wasn't here for a cultural exchange. "Which way was Cipher Nine headed when he left you?"

"We do not know the way; but he was close to his objective. He will already be off planet, and...and we cannot go back into the Nightmare Lands. We, including you, must seek his next assignment elsewhere."

No. I couldn't miss him again. But if he was still a day ahead of me... "You'd better hope *we* can find that assignment."

"We have clearances. Connections."

Because handing this guy a holo was my first choice, right? "You use them to make trouble for me and mine, I'll make you wish I'd gone with the plan A of leaving you a paste on the forest floor."

"We wish to cooperate," he repeated earnestly. "What Cipher Nine seeks dwarfs the war with the Republic and any other concern."

"That so? Great. Then we'll have something to talk about on the way."

## **20. SEEKING THE DEAD**

I had the Imp Vector on the ship. I had Yuun running files on the message dropbox account Vector voluntarily gave us access to. I had Jorgan monitoring the ship, keeping us in a dead patch of space with clear views in all directions. I had Forex keeping his sights on Vector. And I had Vector sitting, hands bound, opposite me, while he spun his story.

Hell of a story.

But Vector told it with a straight face. After describing the whole crazy scheme Cipher Nine had been chasing, he got back to the Cipher himself. "He believes this Star Cabal conspiracy has some power at its center that he will be able to steal rather than simply breaking."

"Power? Is that supposed to be people? Places? Weapons? Exactly what is he looking to get hold of, that's going to hand him all this influence?"

"We are not certain. We must not allow Cipher Nine to find out."

"Sounds like whatever it is they use for their pull would be quite the catch for your Empire."

"If loyal Imperial agents were on the trail we would reconsider this arrangement."

"Yeah. Too bad reconsidering isn't a luxury you have right now."

"That is also a factor," he said mildly. Now that he was out of physical pain everything he said was mild. And even, and steady, and with those eyes I had no idea how worried he was, and that bothered me. Even more than the Killik thing in general did.

"So all this, this Cabal, that's what Cipher Nine has been chasing full time ever since he blew off the SIS on Quesh."

"That is correct," said Vector.

I thought about it. It all sounded off. "I think this Cabal's got it all backwards," I said.

"We agree. Their purpose has been corrupted over time. Their original ideal, of breaking the power of the Jedi and the Sith over Force-blinds, there was an admirable sentiment in it, but they have since turned to darker ways in pursuit of their goal."

"No, the goal's wrong, too. Why are they so hell-bent on bashing Jedi and Sith? Seems to me ordinary people can screw up this galaxy just fine."

Vector opened his mouth and hesitated a second before speaking. "At this juncture, we are not inclined to disagree," he said.

"Well. We'll get your Cipher. And then after that I can sort out his last mission. And what to do with you."

Yuun knocked and opened the door before Vector could respond. "Captain," said the Gand, waving a datapad. "Yuun has retrieved this man's messages."

"Anything interesting?"

"Yes." The Gand handed me the datapad.

I looked it over; Yuun had brought up the only two new messages. "Huh," I said. "You've been declared dead, Mister Hyllus. Just the same, you've got orders to report for an assignment on...Corellia." I raised my head to look at Vector. "Any chance Cipher Nine was on that invite list?"

Black Joiner eyes being what they were, I couldn't tell where Vector was looking. "We expect so," he said. "We have always been assigned with him since we joined Intelligence."

Which made him party to a whole mess of things I wanted to resolve before this was over, and one thing in particular. "Best not remind me of that, Hyllus."

"Understood," he said meekly. "Still, if this summons is genuine, then we will find Cipher Nine on Corellia."

"And if it isn't I'm betting I'll still find something interesting." I turned away. "Yuun, lay in a course. We're moving out."

\*

"Wow," said Kirsk.

He had docked his ship at the Republic station orbiting Corellia and joined Havoc's ship.

"Wow," said Kirsk.

Vector watched the two of us, turning his head back and forth just enough to suggest that the focus of those black eyes was moving.

"Wow," said Kirsk. "Brother, you don't get to complain about me biting off more'n I can chew ever again. Ever."

"I'm chewing," I said.

"So I guess you've gotta find someone on scenic Corellia? They can't be calling him Cipher Nine there."

"We do know the name he gave to the military," said Vector.

"Good, that's a start. Any idea where he spends his free time?"

Vector shook his head. "With a war on he might find...entertainment...anywhere,"

"That's kind of alarming," said Kirsk.

"Quite."

"All right. So we'll look. That brings up the other question. I'm an open-minded kind of guy, but I'm kind of surprised you're willing to hand over the mother of all conspiracy theories to the Republic just to stop this Cipher."

"We are not convinced that its power is something that can be harnessed. Whether it truly is or not, Cipher Nine must be stopped at any cost, by anyone in a position to do so. It so happens that the Captain took us into custody before we could report to true Imperial authority."



"We saved your life," Jorgan said darkly. "Talk about 'custody' if you want, but you never would've made it to Imperial grounds."

"Only we brought his path out. Only he can bring our path forward," Yuun said. "Symmetry."

I shrugged that observation off. "You think we can find him, Yuun?"

"Difficult. But possible, with Vector's help."

"I could report as ordered," said Vector. "And determine where Cipher Nine's squad was deployed to."

"Are you joking?" I said. "No way are you walking out of here without an escort."

"And nobody on board can plausibly pass for Imperial to go with him," said Jorgan. "Aliens, a Republic droid, and a guy with an Imp criminal record half a parsec long?"

"I could do it," said Kirsk. "My rap sheet's not nearly as long, and I've got papers for an even more upright citizen. I could tag along, see that things go to plan."

"No way," I snapped. "I'm not sending you into an Imperial base. They would kill you before Hyllus even got a chance to stab you in the back."

Vector shifted. "We are willing to report and receive our orders, with or without supervision. It may be our only chance to locate Cipher Nine."

"You're not walking, and you're sure as hell not taking my brother anywhere."

"If we wished to turn on any of you," Vector said coolly, "we would already have notified the nest, and Killiks would already be converging on your location."

The room got even quieter. I exchanged looks with Jorgan, Yuun, and Kirsk.

"Can you do that?" said Kirsk.

"It is one of the gifts of Joining."

"You've been in touch with them this whole time," said Jorgan. "Haven't you."

"Only to share that we are alive. Only to..." And then, suddenly, Vector started out of his chair. I whipped my rifle to readiness but he just stood there. "The fingerlings," he breathed. "They survived."

\*

"The what?" I said suspiciously.

"Fingerlings," said the black-eyed Joiner. "Our smallest brethren. A number of them accompanied us when we departed Alderaan. Some reside within our flesh." He didn't seem one whit self-conscious about that revolting announcement. "Some larger ones came along to take up residence in the cargo hold and observe our travels. We were certain that the ones we left behind had been killed by Cipher Nine, but...it seems he did not eradicate them. Their song is weak; we could not hear it from a distance. But it still sings."

"Can you home in on it?"

"Yes. We know where you should seek to land."

\*

The biggest Imperial spaceport on Corellia was far from the Republic-held one. Too far. Even after we did land there I knew it'd be reckless of me to go in with the team to the Imperial facility. We used Kirsk's ship and Kirsk's fake neutral-merchant ID papers, but still, anyone who knew to look out for a two-meter-tall guy with a scar and an attitude would blow the whistle.

But I wanted in on the hunt.

We ran into trouble with clearances when we sought out Cipher Nine's ship at the spaceport. He had his hangar locked up pretty tight, both in the automated systems and with the regular guards.

"Can we hit the maintenance door?" I suggested.

"It is likely also secured. In addition, Cipher Nine's ship has certain prototype...safeguards...against unauthorized entry. Neither I nor you would survive the attempt."

"So we're stuck waiting to intercept."

"Looks like it," growled Jorgan. "Not like a sniper's never seen that before."

Vector had folded his hands together in front of him and squeezed his eyes shut. After a long moment he opened them again. "The fingerlings do live. They report that Cipher Nine arrived about thirty hours ago. They do not know where he went, but if necessary they can disperse through the spaceport to watch for his return."

"Do it. I want our people staying together." I turned to Yuun. "Set up a camera by one of the observation windows?"

Yuun nodded and fished the device in question out of his pack. I turned back to Vector. "Hyllus, can you hear confirmation from your little guys when you're a few clicks out?"

"Certainly."

"Then let me know if Cipher Nine shows his face. We'll have that and our cameras. Maybe we can't touch the ship, but he can't touch it either without us knowing."

\*

We returned to Kirsk's ship. Yuun went through the normal motions of retrieving Vector's correspondence and handing him the holo-disabled datapad with the results.

Vector's eyebrows went up. "Interesting. Cipher Nine has been declared dead under his civilian name. Killed in an explosion at the Corellian Museum of History."

"Yeah," snorted Jorgan. "Right."

"There seems to be a lot of declared-death going around," I said. "What does this mean for us?"

"The Cipher makes an obvious end to his trail," said Yuun. "As he has before. Another trail must leave it. If he wishes to put distance between himself and his pursuers, his ship is the likely next stop."

"Not if his higher-ups already know it's his ship," said Jorgan. "If I were him I'd be playing it cool on the surface or hijacking someone else's vessel."

"You're not him," I snapped. I didn't mean it to come out that harshly, but I meant it anyway.

\*

Against my better judgment I took everyone but Jorgan out to the collapsed museum. The place was a mess – intentional demolitions, ugly and thorough.

"Got anything for me?" I asked my Findsman.

Yuun shook his head. "Not yet. The only signs are those of efficient destruction."

So it went. He could track the destruction of the building, identifying the point sources of explosions, but any sign of someone departing was long gone.

There was nothing else to do. We went on back to the ship. I got ready for sleep. To this day I'll never know how I managed to sleep that night. The exhaustion won out over the adrenaline, I guess.

Didn't last long. Someone pounded at my door in the middle of the night. "Captain!" Vector was shouting. "Captain, wake up!"

I had my blaster in hand before I opened the door. "What?"

"The fingerlings report that Cipher Nine has returned to the spaceport."

"Damn. Get the others." I made straight for the bridge to start getting landing clearance.

Kirsk showed up a minute later. "So, adventure?" he said cheerfully.

"Something like it," I growled. "Take over here, I have to get dressed."

We got departure clearance almost the same time Cipher Nine did. Then we moved to trail him.

When I got back to the bridge I looked over Kirsk's shoulder at the streamlined little luxury vehicle before us. It was hard to keep my eyes on for some reason – it flickered invisible half the time. Weird stealth tech, maybe more prototype than real production quality, I don't know. What mattered was that we could track it.

"If they hit hyperspace," I said, "we're toast."

"They won't," said Kirsk. "If they wanted to they would've done it by now."

The damn thing was fast, but we kept up in pursuit a ways behind. I shot a message to Balkar to let him know where we were going. I wasn't really sure if we could get out again. We followed the silver ship well out of Corellia's main planet's orbit; now we were coming up on a small rocky planet, and in the shadow of that planet was a little space station. No markings, no traffic. Apart from one or two lights in the upper spire it looked dead.

"This our guy?" I said.

"It is," said Vector.

Kirsk and Yuun, between the two of them, managed to remotely slice controls for one of the few hangar doors and the forcefield that went with it. We landed.

We rolled out.

## 21. ANSWERS

We had landed on the mysterious space station hidden in the shadow of one of the smaller planets of the Corellian system. Somewhere in there was Cipher Nine. Kirsk stayed guarding the ship while Havoc Squad walked. Vector, unarmed, came with us; he might come in handy.

Upon leaving the hangar we found a broad curve of hallway studded with stacks of crates and surrounded by doors to who knew what. And in the middle of all that stood an Imperial, young, dark-skinned, uniformed. "Stop where you are," she said. Her voice had a slight tremor to it.

Havoc Squad drew their weapons as one.

"Hey! No! Look at me!" She waved a little at all of us. I watched her. "We're not going to fight. Just keep looking at me."

Of course I wasn't going to shoot her. I wasn't going to fight. I kept looking at her.

"Ensign," said Vector, stepping forward, "surely you realize that Cipher Nine cannot be allowed to continue this power grab."

"I just need you, to stay still, and keep looking at me," she said. She was signaling something with one hand. I didn't look around to see who was answering it.

"Sir, we must not allow ourselves to fall victim to this Imperial trick!" Forex brayed. "Your deception is useless, dastardly Imperial! The cause of freedom will always triumph!"

The girl turned wide-eyed to the droid. At that moment it occurred to me to start doing something.

I set my rifle to full auto and let loose.

In the scream of blasters it hardly registered that a door was bursting open to my left. A woman's rich voice pealed throughout the room. "Hel-lo, ugly!"

I brought my sights around. The woman who'd yelled was armored head to toe and carrying a rifle half her own size. She dodged my first flurry of shots with a loud ringing laugh.

After the auto streak it'd be a second before I could get a decent rate of fire. I dove for the nearest cover and heard her slamming footsteps pursuing.

The thermal detonator she tossed came past my corner before she did. I cursed and scrambled back to get out of the blast radius. By the time I was clear I saw her blaster fire angling in to where I would've been standing.

It was Yuun who practically flew in out of nowhere to close with her and activate his electrostaff full power. Focused on me as she was, she never saw it coming.

I made sure she was down before I looked around. Jorgan was down on the ground, squirming to avoid the claws of a huge rakghoul. Vector, having been unarmed from the start, was staying behind cover. M1-4X was on full blaster fire against the monster; it hardly seemed to care.

I added my blaster fire and heard Yuun doing the same. The thing reared, sprang towards me. Then curled up halfway through. It skidded to a halt at the ground at my feet, staying balled up tight and unmoving.

It lay still for a few moments. The squad started drifting back together.

Then the rakghoul jumped.

It was probably pretty well equipped to deal with 99% of combat-capable humans. Not me. I caught the damn thing as it sprang up for my face, and...well. I'd just as soon not describe how I took that one down. Hand to hand and claw to claw I'll admit to. I could say the details were blacked out in straight-up fury, but that wouldn't be true.

But it needed killing.

We shot it a few more times to be sure. I wiped my hands on the uniformed woman's jacket. Then we did a sweep of the room. It was empty but for one open door that framed a completely immobile humanoid droid.

Oddly, it didn't attack. I signaled to hold fire while I approached. It stayed standing in the doorway, arms relaxed at its sides. "Fascinating," it said in some strange blend of feminine voices.

"Out of my way," I said.

"You have come for Cipher Nine," she said.

"Yeah."

"I estimate a ninety-seven point four per cent chance that you will succeed in eliminating him. Less if I oppose you." She tilted her head. "But not much less."

I hoped Forex's weaponry was rated against machinery like her, because my blaster rifle would have to get a lucky shot in some wiring joint to have any effect at all and durasteel is one thing I can't take hand to hand.

"I wish to discuss terms," announced the droid. "I believe you present unique opportunities for learning."

"Like hell," I said. "Forex, why don't you show her how a real war droid works."

"With pleasure, sir!" Forex's missile turrets sprang to readiness. Then he got started.

Over the whine and crash of small missiles I could barely hear her saying "This chassis is inadequate." Then she toppled and fell, Forex's blaster bolts streaming almost continuously until she stopped moving.

"Good," I said. "Now. Let's keep moving."

I knew which way to go. Toward the center. It was practically calling to me, and, with Jorgan covering my back and me covering his, we hit a smaller inner-ring corridor. And a big half-open door.

"Any more insights for me?" I asked Vector quietly.

"No. There is nothing of the nest in there."

"Right. Well then, we do this the old-fashioned way. Don't fire until I do or he does, people. I'm going in."

"Sir," Jorgan said in the voice that meant he wanted to argue. "Don't do anything stupid."

"Too late for that. Don't worry, we've got this."

I hoped I had it.



.....

"It's yours now. Everything we built, everything we kept hidden from you. But between you and me, I want to show you one last thing."

The man called Hunter tapped a couple of buttons on a wrist console. A shimmering holo effect swept around him, and then, suddenly, he was a she, slight, wounded, damaged, kneeling at Cipher Nine's feet.

"I haven't shown anyone my real face in a long time," she said, her voice almost leaden.

I'm touched," said Cipher Nine. "I was starting to think our time together didn't mean anything to you."

"Heh. You know how much it meant. You never gave up me. I couldn't give up on you."

"True. It wouldn't do to walk away. One of us was made for the other. With the serum, with everything? I knew you the day we met, Hunter. When Ardun Kothe activated my keyword, my first thought was, does Hunter know? Because I bet he'd like it. You did love it, didn't you? Loved owning me? Teasing, all those possibilities. Would you really have let me die with the Shadow Arsenal? There was so much more you could have done. I might've even liked it."

Hunter stared up at him and shook her head. "You still don't get it, do you? Sure, it was fun, but what matters is that the Cabal and the Codex are the powers that buy us freedom. If you're going to wreck our party, make it count. Show the Jedi and Sith we won't bow to them any longer."

"Why would I waste this on the Jedi and the Sith? Setting up that kind of war does sound entertaining, but honestly I've got some fun ideas for myself in mind first. Don't pretend you were using it for noble ends, Hunter, you don't care about the

Jedi or the Sith any more than I do. You were in it for the fun of pulling strings. Just like me."

"You're wrong." Hunter's smile was long gone; now she looked up at him with something akin to disgust. "I'm not that kind of girl," she said with a tired remnant of humor.

"No? That's awkward, then. Because that's the kind of guy you're leaving in charge." Cipher Nine smiled. "Much obliged, Hunter dear."

.....

I stepped in and all my attention was caught at once by Cipher Nine, in the room's center, standing over a woman slumped on her knees.

The Imperial agent turned around, a smile spreading across his broad face. He set a hand on his blaster and chuckled.

I shot him before he could get a word in. Then I shot him again. The first blaster bolt would've been enough; I've got decent aim. Still I kept walking. I kept shooting. The son of a bitch fell over without so much as a tremor.

I stood over him, put a last bolt in, and looked back around at my crew and at the very surprised-looking woman. "I hate Imp speeches," I said.

\*

The kneeling woman was in bad shape. Her jacket was torn and scorched and she was bent over some wound I couldn't see. Her face was flushed, her eyes wide while she stared at Cipher Nine's body. "You. What have you done?" she said hoarsely.

"Only what needed doing." I gestured for Yuun to pull out a medpac while I approached her. "Do you need assistance, ma'am?"

Her eyes widened. She laughed, a shrill and hysterical sound in the otherwise silent room. "You know," she wheezed, "it's hard to tell which is worse, keeping him or not? At least he knew."

"You're not making sense, ma'am." I knelt and accepted a medpac from Yuun. Whatever she was, whatever she was doing here, patching her up seemed the right thing to do.

But when I reached out to take her arm she scrambled back. "Don't bother, Vierce. The game is over."

I stopped cold. "You know my name too, huh?"

"And a hell of a lot more than that." Something hard was growing in her voice. "We've spoken before."

"Hunter." It was Vector, from the doorway. "Your aura writhes swiftly now."

She looked over my shoulder. "Vector. The only man who ever annoyed the Cipher as much as I did." She half laughed. "I got jealous sometimes, you know."

Hunter the disappeared SIS agent? "Jorgan," I snapped, "take Hyllus out of here. The rest of you, out." I wanted to be alone with Hunter for this one. I waited until the door was shut before I turned back. "You were running this whole show?" I said.

"I had help. Until Cipher Nine wiped them out."

"You could've stopped him."

Her lip twitched. "I was curious how far he could get. And then, then he thought he could take it from us." She rocked herself a little. "You don't have much, Captain, but I guess we'd better put you to use."

"I've got no interest in getting used by you."

"Oh, I'll be out of your way soon enough. And what, the power to sway the galaxy beyond what the Jedi or Sith could even dream of doesn't strike you as a good thing?"

"Good? That's not what I've been seeing."

I don't know what the look on my face was, but it got her to sneer and whuff a laugh. "I've protected you from horrors you can't even imagine, Vierce. Armageddon doesn't stop itself. Time after time, it's me who stepped between you, all of you, and disaster."

"You want me to thank you for the harm you substituted?"

"It'd be a start. Listen. The Black Codex, there next to you. It holds the secrets of the galaxy. Study it before you do anything rash, all right? It has things you haven't even imagined, everything you need to fix matters up yourself. You don't know what the Star Cabal is yet, but take a look. You have to know what we fought for is true. You have to know that we did what we had to."

"Take up the banner, huh?"

"If that's how you want to think about it, soldier."

"I don't," I said. "You think I want to end up like you or Cipher Nine? Change the galaxy or whatever you thought you were doing? Nothing changes because of people like you. You can rearrange all the mud in the galaxy as much as you like, but you don't make any of it better. What makes things better is people doing what's right and not being afraid to let anyone else see it. People of conscience. The people you think of as numbers while you're busy shuffling around the dirt that you think is all there is to life." I tossed the medpac at her feet and stepped back. "You had your chance. Now it's our turn."

"Ideals won't make your war go away."

"You can explain that at trial. I'm putting you under arrest." For what, I wasn't sure yet, but if she was cut from the same cloth as Cipher Nine there was bound to be plenty of reasons.

Her tiny bitter laugh came out as a snort. "Oh, good boy. Maybe they'll give you a medal for trying." Then she squeezed something on her wrist. Ozone scorched the

air. She shook and slumped even further. Before I could rightly identify her wrist console as a source of that sudden electric shock, she was dead.

I turned around to the cube suspended in its stasis chamber. Was it everything Hunter said? I guess I would have to see.

\*

"Vierce?" It was Kirsk's voice on comms.

"What?"

"Just thought you should know there's an Imperial destroyer coming in hot. Cipher's buddies or enemies or whatever he's got probably know he's in here."

"Damn. Going now." I grabbed the Codex cube – it was a heavy little beast – and ran. "Everyone, back to the ship. Now."

We hit the ramp at a run. Kirsk didn't wait for the full airlock cycle to open the forcefields. We darted out and saw the destroyer on visuals, moving in on the station.

"Tell me you've got hyperspace numbers up," I said.

"Working on it," said Kirsk. "Strap yourselves in, guys."

We all took our seats, and then we got out of there.

## 22. QUESTIONS

I sat in the holo room on Kirsk's ship. Vector was locked in an empty cabin; Kirsk was piloting; M1-4X was conducting a systems check and recharge in the cargo hold. Yuun, Jorgan and I sat in a triangle.

"This Codex will open many roads," Yuun said slowly. "Some constructive. Some dangerous."

"Agreed," I said. "This isn't really what I was prepared to do. We're soldiers, not... I don't know, arbiters of fate."

"Honestly, sir, the best thing might be to throw it away," said Jorgan. "This kind of thing will only turn into a weapon."

I shook my head. "It probably IDs a bunch of Imperial agents in our own ranks. Along with who knows what else. It's too valuable to just discard."

"That's always how it starts," said Jorgan. "Isn't it?"

"I know," I said glumly. "No easy answer."

"I don't want to know what Garza would do with it," Jorgan said. "Not after some of the orders she's given. We'll have to look outside the Army."

"The Jedi may possess the discipline to use it well," suggested Yuun.

"Everyone who died for this seems to have agreed neither Jedi nor Sith should get near it," said Jorgan. "Not saying that's a counterargument, but it's something to think about. The Jedi only work because they serve the Republic. Give them something that'll give them the pull to stage a 'peaceful' takeover of anything they want? I don't know."

"We can talk to Balkar," I said. "He stuck his neck out to get our start here, and stars know he would have a million good uses for it right off the bat."

Yuun considered. "It would light many paths the SIS must walk."

"Balkar's got a head on his shoulders," conceded Jorgan. "We'd still need to check up on him. This isn't something you leave in one person's hands."

I set the Codex on the floor. "I think he could do a lot of good with it."

Jorgan nodded. "Now we just have to figure out how smoked our careers are. We'd better check in with Garza."

"That'll be a hell of a conversation," I said.

"She can't yet get firing squads working via holo. We'll have the chance to talk."

"Think it'll make any difference, what we're giving Balkar?"

"Maybe," said Jorgan. "Maybe not."

\*

Jorgan came with me when I went to the cabin we'd locked Vector in. When I opened the door Vector was waiting for us. He looked tired; the dark smudges under his black eyes made him look more alien than ever.

"It is time, then?" he said, and I thought the calm of his voice was a little thinner than usual.

"Time to sort you out? Yeah." I leaned against the doorway's edge, not quite blocking Jorgan's view. "Question for you. Were you ever assigned to Nar Shaddaa with the Cipher?"

Vector shook his head. "We knew he went to Nar Shaddaa once during our association to make contact with the Republic. We did not accompany him; instead we met him on Dromund Kaas once he was finished."

"Then the name Elara Dorne doesn't mean anything to you."

He shook his head. "No. Why do you ask?"

"It factors into whether you walk out of this alive."

"Sir," Jorgan said in a low voice, "our people will want him for questioning. I'd have to call this guy high value, and there's been no agreement for safe passage."

"I know that," I said. But this guy seemed to be sane. The kind we needed more, not less, of. And he'd given us Cipher Nine. With the Black Codex we were in a position to find everything else ourselves. Perhaps more to the point, he'd shown himself to be the kind to help the side that can do right, no matter the cost to himself. He was the only Imp who reminded me of Dorne.

I turned to Vector. "You're free to go," I said. "We can drop you off in neutral space. You've been a lot of help."

He blinked. "We...thank you. In truth we did not expect to survive this."

"Neither did I. Expect you to, that is. Now I suggest you get back to your diplomacy. The Imperial spy business is about to be in trouble."

"We have no desire to return to work as a 'covert assault operative'," he said. He obviously disliked the taste of the words. "Returning to our diplomatic roots would be a welcome change."

"Yeah," I said. I didn't want to get friendly. But there were other Republic people who might be willing to help people like him shake off the diehard bastards. 'People like him' meaning something other than the Imps I was used to. A new idea, really. One I wouldn't have believed a year ago. "Vector. I mentioned Elara Dorne. You owe her your life. Don't forget it."

He frowned a little. "Elara Dorne," he said reflectively. "We will remember." He paused and looked a little more intently at my face. "And as we remember, the nest remembers."

"That's..." Something caught in my throat. "That's good," I said.

\*

The monster was dead. Justice had been served. The chase was over. For now, all I had to do was rest.

Would she be there?



I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow. I dreamed the old park across from the Bomb Shelter cantina. There was no blaster fire. No explosions, no flyovers, no orange light on the horizon. The trees were all budding, a couple of the early ones already going crazy with white flowers.

I sat on the park bench, and things were peaceful.

I felt her walking up behind me. I gestured for her to come over, so she came around to sit next to me.

"I won't see you again," I said. "Will I."

"I don't think so, sir," said Dorne. "The part that applies to me is done."

"Yeah. I guess." I ran out of words.

"Thank you for seeing this through," she said.

"It was the least I could do."

"Now that things for me are settled, I expect you have matters to attend to elsewhere." She cocked her head and smiled almost impishly. "For example, somewhere out there is an incredibly fortunate woman who doesn't know it yet. At some point in the future you'll have to figure out who that is so you can let her know."

I took a few moments to look at her face, feel the gentle breeze. "Might've been nice for it to be you," I said.

"I think I would have liked that, Vierce."

We stood up at the same time. She reached up to hug me; I hugged her back. She kissed my cheek, very lightly, and then I let her go.

She took half a step back and saluted. "Sir," she said, just as warmly as she'd said my name. She left the salute to stand at ease. "Goodbye."

I woke up.

## EPILOGUE

Jonas Balkar, working with trusted agents within the SIS, took charge of the Black Codex and started the careful progress, first of rooting out Cabal and Imperial agents within the SIS itself, then cleaning out up the Republic bureaucracy. Not only did he find the right pressure points to allow Havoc Squad to be reinstated with current membership intact, he uncovered the Imperial machinations of Zian, the Senator who had pushed so hard to have Havoc Squad disbanded. Balkar now keeps in close touch with the members of Havoc Squad.

Kirsk Savins got a semi-regular gig as SIS informant, slicer, and tricky-extraction-jobs pilot. His security clearance was processed to retroactively make his involvement in the Cipher Nine affair legal. Actually he got a lot of paperwork retroactively declaring his blunders legal. The SIS gives him a long leash. He tries not to abuse it. Honest, he does try.

Aleksei Dorne requested a transfer into the SIS under Jonas Balkar's program and was, on the strength of his service record to date and the recommendation of Vierce Savins, accepted into the service. They stay in touch regularly as Aleksei continues to work through the transition from an Imperial-dominated sphere to a Republic one.

Vector Hyllus returned to the Imperial Diplomatic Service and transitioned into efforts on stable three-party agreements – Republic, Killik, Imperial – in contested worlds.

The secrets of the Black Codex gave General Garza all the pull she needed to restore Havoc Squad and reframe its members as heroes. Balkar cordially and firmly refused to give her open access to the Codex thereafter. Garza keeps a close eye on Havoc Squad now that they've returned to service; they haven't let her down. While they maintain close ties with the SIS, the squad dedicates itself to functioning as soldiers on straight-up military and humanitarian missions, just as Vierce always meant to.

Elara Dorne was, upon inquiry, cleared of all charges against her, and received her due entry on the monument wall that encircles the Senate plaza on Coruscant as a soldier of the Republic.

## **CODA: CANON UNIVERSE**

Elara and I were walking down the sidewalk in a less frequented area of Nar Shaddaa – maybe not the most wholesome place, but toughs are rarely inclined to mess with me and, when we were in town, Elara did like picking up supplies at that one shop.

I looked around. Oddly enough the place was completely deserted. Some puff of warm air, probably from a faulty recirculator, rolled down the street and ruffled Elara's hair.

Something about the moment caught at me, so I did the first thing that came to mind, which was lightly take and turn her to kiss her. She made a small surprised sound even while kissing me back. She pressed up close; her belly was getting big enough to feel now in these embraces, but she didn't seem to mind the pressure. Which is good, because I like holding her.

She dropped back a bit and smiled, and though it was a little self-conscious there was a sparkle in her eyes. "Not that I'm complaining, dear, but is there an occasion for this?"

No more than any other moment with her. "Just you," I said, and took a second longer to hold her before sliding one arm further around, letting her lean easily into me, and turning back to the road. "Let's go, Elara."

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You can find Bright's fiction blog at [serielephemera.tumblr.com](http://serielephemera.tumblr.com). and questions and comments will be read for as long as the blog is active at [serielephemera.tumblr.com/ask](http://serielephemera.tumblr.com/ask).

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