

Overcoming Adviercity



a SWTOR fic by brightephemera

Titles

SWTOR fanfic

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by brightephemera

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Vierce Savins was a veteran of a brutal Imperial occupation on his home planet. When his Republic assignment hands him a former Imperial, it's only a matter of time before something breaks...one way or the other. This first-person account moves between flashbacks and the present of the game timeline.

Dedication

For lesabear, who shipped my ship

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.

Overcoming Adviercity 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 Spoiler Warnings

This story contains the occasional bloody scene, sometimes a little graphic.

This story contains spoilers throughout the Republic Trooper line, including Aric Jorgan and Elara Dorne personal quests, and some Imperial planetary questlines.

This story features Republic Trooper/Elara Dorne romance.

Foreword

Overcoming Adviercity came at a special time for me. In the game I had just completed the Sith Warrior line with active romance and I was furious with all things Imperial. I made a big scarred Lieutenant Vierce to stick it to every Imp I met. Every word NPCs delivered in that accent rubbed at a raw spot and heightened my rage. With Elara I was rude, to say the least.

She took it with grace. She stayed professional. Somewhere along the line I stopped raging at every “Leftenant.” Somewhere along the line I realized that she was unshakeably kind, and brave, and good. Somewhere along the line I forgot to hate her. How much remorse can you fit on the dialogue wheel? After going through hell and dragging it after me on one ankle for weeks or months, how many chances does a person like me ever really get?

So then this happened.

Dramatis Personae



VIERCE SAVINS



KIRSK SAVINS

VIERCE SAVINS, a veteran resistance fighter and grateful Republic officer;
KIRSK SAVINS, a seasoned blockade runner and Vierce's younger brother;
MAMA SAVINS, the boys' mother;
The RIDGESIDE CORE, old friends and fellow fighters of the Kegled II resistance;

ARIC JORGAN, ELARA DORNE, M1-4X, TANNO VIK, and YUUN, Republic soldiers assigned to Havoc Squad;

GENERAL GARZA, SERGEANT AVA JAXO, AGENT JONAS BALKAR, and sundry other superiors and colleagues

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Overcoming Adviercity

Part I

Kegled II: Prologue

The year was 6 ATC, and no Imperial would ever set foot on Kegled II again.

The occupation had been thirteen long years, backed by the Republic in secret even after the treaty. That's why I and a crowd of the other resistance fighters were leaving: to give back for what they'd done for us.

And to hit more Imperials. That was a factor, too.

There had been a party for the departure of the last Imp. There had been a party to keep from crying when the prisons with their few survivors opened up. Now we were headed to a smaller party on my brother's ship: our last hurrah before we went to space for (most of us) the first time.

I carried my duffle in one hand, just some extra clothes. I had turned in my rifle when the Imps left. I felt naked.

Beside me walked Mama, half my size and twice my strength. Her greying hair was styled to her jawline. She had dressed up for the day. She never liked me leaving, but she would face it at her best.

And on her other side, Kirsk. My little brother was carrying nothing but his ego. He wasn't going to sign on. He had just offered his ship for the trip to Coruscant. It would give us a little more time without bothering passersby on public transit.

"You'll probably fail the physical," said Kirsk.

I tried to figure that and couldn't. "What? Why?"

"Your head's too big. They'll have to cut you down to size if you want to fit through doors."

"They have full-sized doors on Coruscant. Unless you don't believe Eddy?"

"That's just what Eddy wants you to think. I've been there too, you know. I know these things."

We chattered to keep Mama's spirits up. The road from her little house, a tiny holdout amidst a booming city, wasn't all that long, and I think we all preferred the time together.

Mama slowed in the concourse. "How much of this city is hangar?" she mused.

"Today, part of it's ours." Kirsk was in fine form. I let him lead. West Ford City had grown but there were still friends in the crowd, and most seemed to know where we were going. One girl stopped in the crowd, looking at Kirsk and said, "Like a pox. He returns."

"I'll call you," Kirsk said gaily, and she gritted back "Just you try."

I grinned. "Didn't she work at Cahill's when we were younger and less solvent?"

Kirsk tapped at the cybernetics on his temple, a sure sign he was scrambling for words. "I didn't expect you to remember. She always liked me more."

"Except, apparently, now." There was just something right about a world where a woman was angry with Kirsk. "I don't forget."

Kirsk had traded his freighter. Down, apparently. The ship awaiting us was squat, vaguely bulbous, and beaten to within an inch of its unhappy life.

"That thing flies?" I said winningly.

"Only with a pilot, so play nice." It was true he had enough experience as a spacer - more than the average eighteen-year-old. Somehow my education in resistance hideouts had missed that.

Down a twisty hallway and in a badly-lit bridge, five young adults were gathered: the Ridgeside Core, the ones who had joined the resistance as children and grown up fighters. They greeted my family with enthusiasm. I don't think a single person there hadn't pretended Mama was kin to talk their way out of situations.

I blocked Kirsk from the punch on the shelf until he informed me, exasperated, that he had a droid to do the piloting. On cue a dumpy astromech trundled in. It looked new, at least to him. It had three restraining bolts on it in progressively worse shape.

It beeped. <<This unit = stolen // return to owner = reward>>

"He just likes saying that," said Kirsk.

"You sure he's not just going to fly is until the nearest precinct office?" said someone.

"Sure I'm sure," said Kirsk, his brown eyes wide. "I, uh." He tapped his cybernetics. "Better just double-check his programming. Carry on." He nudged the droid with his foot and led it out.

“He ran,” sighed Mama, not for the first time. “Well, I had something for all of you anyway.” She pulled out her old brushed-phobium holo, the one she’d been using since I was a kid and probably before. Its mate was in a chest at home, and had been since Da died. She handed out her gift: a full listing of holofrequencies for almost everyone we had ever met, importantly including one another and one another’s parents. Hugs were exchanged all around. And she held up pretty well when she turned to me.

“I’ll call you,” I said. “Unlike some sons who shall remain nameless.” I knew Kirsk was actually out of the room because he didn’t chime in there. “Thanks, Mama.”

She reached up and I bent down to hug her. “I love you,” she said, a little shakily.

“Kirsk, get in here,” I yelled, and touched Mama’s cheek, and lowered my voice. “Love you, too, Mama.”

She met him stepped out to the hallway. I turned back to the knot of Republic recruits. “So,” I said. “This is it.”

“Republic ho,” said one.

The oldest of us was picking up a glass and pouring something pink into it. He offered it to me with a look and a nod. The drink gave a telling little wobble after I took it, but I nodded back. I was fine. And we had faced harder things than one little goodbye before.

1. Taris: The Defector Speaks

Four years later...

The Republic was good to me. At least, up until I found myself “leader” of the “elite” “Havoc Squad.” I try not to be sarcastic, but I was replacing a bunch of defectors (to the Empire. The Empire! Who does that!?) to command an angry, recently demoted Cathar. That was Havoc Squad. Him and me. I think they were 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, did I have every reason to want to see them stand and account for themselves.

My first lead was on 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 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."

Commander. An accent like that, in command. I didn't acknowledge the salute. "Lieutenant Vierce Savins. Havoc Squad. 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 sure 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, not quite sincerely, 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.”

It was, I realized as we mounted up outside, the longest exchange I’d ever had with an Imperial without physically attacking. The encounter felt more than a little unsatisfying. But I had work to do. Eh, with any luck she would’ve wandered into a rakghoul nest by the time I got back to base.

2. Taris: Needles and Needles

That night and the one after were spent in the field in camps surrounded by emitters meant to keep the rakghouls away. I only had to wake up to kill a crazed monster chewing on my tent twice. Our contact back to base kept being that woman. I was storing up feedback for Colonel Gaff about her inability to do anything but refer to a rulebook.

And then we found Needles, our missing Havoc Squad defector. Hell of a morning. Less I say about his lab, the better. At least we gave him the execution he deserved. Strangely, Dorne's connection broke up around the time I was dealing with a stray Imp officer. I had no intention of asking what that was about.

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 Gunner. 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. Kirsk showed up. His jacket was half shredded and his face looked bruised.

"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.” I could, 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 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 that than a call came up on the ship’s main holo. It was General Garza: leader of Republic spec ops and my commanding officer. I called Jorgan in and activated the holo.

“General.” I saluted.

She was grey-haired and Mandalorian iron through and through. “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.”

The big find of Needles’ lab. Jorgan and Garza gave me matching hard looks. I had noticed this already in this job: they got snippy when my conscience inconvenienced them.

“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?” She was very close to the bottom of the list of things I wanted to think about. “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.”

Garza didn’t play games and neither did I. I gave it to her straight. “General, I’m not thrilled about having an Imp in my squad.”

She gave me the no-excuses look. I wondered wistfully whether a less prestigious assignment would lead to fewer conversations with her. “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 at her station. She looked up, pale-eyed and inquisitive, when we approached. “Lieutenant? Is there something else I can do for you?”

Scrub the accent? Get out of my life? “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.”

Wouldn’t that be nice?

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.

Dorne saluted back. "I'll prepare my Regulation Six Personnel Transfer documents at once!" she gushed. I wondered whether the Imp rulebook used a numbering system different enough for her to keep them straight.

"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."

"Or just submit a datapad with words on it, Sergeant." Asking for a face-to-face conversation was just too much.

"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 total-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."

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"Aw, he's not done yet. We're not out of juice."

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 father and the three 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 littlest 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 raging injury showing 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 snapped something. "YOU DON'T PUT NEEDLES IN ME!" I bellowed. "Get back, stay away, and put in some motherloving 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.

"Lieutenant," she said. You'd think she'd have the decency...

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 people 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-EE 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 yet. “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?”

“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.

### 3. Nar Shaddaa: Questions and Snow Days

Something I've noticed, I don't usually have the nightmares on evenings I spent talking to Jorgan. Something about being around people, or people I trust, makes it go easier. How it is that swapping war stories makes the occupation less vivid in my sleeping mind I'll never know. But I won't complain.

So after a few days' cleanup on Taris I was talking to him. "I'm struggling to see you as a sniper," I said. We were just sitting around after a big meal. Dorne was off memorizing rulebooks or whatever it was she did with her time. "You're good with the hard heavy high-dynamic combat. Sitting still for a few days like you described? Doesn't seem like you."

"I won't pretend it was more exciting than Havoc Squad. Good work, though. The Deadeyes set up a whole lot of operations for success by cleaning the leadership out early."

"Yeah," I said, "something to be said for precision strikes. Wasn't exactly my specialty."

He gave me a look on the edge of a smile. "Why am I not surprised, Savins?"

"Hey. Smashing everything sets operations up for success, too."

"If it doesn't get your whole squad killed."

"Now, now, I don't intend to repeat that mistake." A pause. "That was a joke."

Jorgan visibly relaxed. We sat quietly for a bit.

Jorgan spoke up. "Funny you should bring up the Deadeyes, though. I got word just the other day. They got captured."

"What? Where? Who's pulling them out?"

"Happened during a routine officer hunt. Somehow the Imps got the drop on them, rounded up the entire unit. Careless." He shook his head. "It's been weeks. I don't know that there is a recovery mission."

"There better be."

"Doesn't sit right with me, either. They were on Nar Shaddaa. Hutt territory, they shouldn't have had any business operating there in the first place."

"Hutts could mean we can cut a deal for information."

"Maybe. Assuming the Imps didn't just black the whole operation out." He pressed his lips thinner for a second. "I need to know what happened to them. Whether they're still alive. If the military has no leads, the Strategic Information Service on Nar Shaddaa might."

The Republics' spy agency. Not my kettle of fish but it didn't have to be. "Got any contacts?"

"Not yet. But you can bet I'll find one."

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"Ready?" said Da, adjusting the helmet on a face-making, five-year-old Kirsk.

"Can I get my own sled?" said Kirsk.

"Not this year. Vierce, hang onto him. Now. Ready?"

A few paces away Dep kicked his old-fashioned phobium-runner sled off and started down the shrub-dotted hill.

"Yeah," said Kirsk, "yeah," and tapped the side of his sled once, waiting for me, seven years old and in charge, to tap behind him. I edged off just enough to push us into a running start, then hopped on, balancing my weight on the vehicle while Da receded behind them.

The gang was all there: Vrenda, babying a tiny Lydian in a big puffy tube, Eddy, puffy herself in more outerwear than three kids needed, Dep, well ahead now on his thin runners, Tot, sawing uneasily along without ever quite reaching a straight-line balance. Only Rizz was missing. It was anyone's guess where he was. Probably tinkering someplace warm.

The first phase of this perfect sledding hill was fast coming to an end. “Leggo,” called Kirsk, tugging the rope handle to steer the sled toward one of the clear archways in the tree stand. I pulled at my brother’s arm anyway to maintain course until we were well in.

In and around the corner to a passage of multiple low mounds. “Clear,” called Kirsk, out of view of the road now, and in unison we popped off our helmets and stowed them, one in front of Kirsk and one behind me. The ice wind riffled our hair and stung our faces, tugging our breaths to streaming wisps. The sky above was limitless blue and the land below was one big white obstacle course just waiting to be tread.

The second turn wasn’t as dangerous as the first; it was just fetching up against a larger bank and angling down to the big straight shot. “Go!” I grabbed the rope control while Kirsk pulled his helmet back up into place. Then he took over while I secured mine. We sat tight speeding into that glorious broad straightaway, packed down to ice by the unstoppable coasting of hundreds of sled runs.

The speeder was already waiting by the road beside this open field. Da, rangy and chap-lipped, strode out toward where Eddy had wiped out from her sled disk in a pinwheel of unwinding scarf. Kirsk and I lifted our sled onto the trailer and trotted out to help Vrenda and Lydian with their unwieldy puff tube. Dep loaded his sled with tenderness, then hopped on board alongside Tot. Kirsk and I joined them; the girls would ride in the cab for the trip up.

Da stopped by the trailer. “Good run?” he asked, like he always did.

“Yeah!” came the chorus.

“Good.” He set a big hand on Kirsk’s helmet and mussed it as if it were hair. “Let’s do it again.”

~~~

We hit the ground on Nar Shaddaa with minimal information. A prototype Republic war droid had been taken by Havoc Squad’s defected commander Tavus and was finishing its development, in Imperial hands, somewhere on the planet. It seemed to be doing its testing by running around making trouble.

Our local contact was a Jonas Balkar, Strategic Information Service. I hadn't dealt much with the SIS to date. I really hoped they knew what they were doing. Both for this, and for the questions I knew Jorgan had lined up.

Perfect.

Balkar turned out to be a dandy in street clothes, slouching in a private lounge off a cantina in the eye-burningly lit Promenade. He greeted us with a lazy wave.

"There you are. Go ahead, take a seat. And keep your voice down."

"Jonas Balkar, right?" I said.

"Let's just stick with Jonas." He flashed an unsettling grin at Sergeant Dorne. I privately looked forward to seeing his reaction when he heard her voice. "Hope you like the cantina. It's not one of my favorites, but it is conveniently located. And I do know which drinks they make right here."

"My eyes are up here, Balkar," I said dryly.

He raised his eyebrows in an innocent kind of way and peeled his eyes off Dorne. "Right, then. There's a vault, not far from here. It's a merc operation, holds valuables for anybody with the credits to pay. Our mutual friend is about to pay them a visit."

"Uh, do we have a welcome party arranged?"

"Not exactly, no. A group of paramilitary types always shows up on the scene before the droid's attacks. We've already spotted them casing the vault. You could head in now, but I don't want you to scare them off. We wouldn't want the guest of honor to skip the party, would we?"

I was lost. "It would be bad if our party was ruined. Definitely bad."

He waved casually again. "I have people with eyes on the vault. Once they spot our target we'll get the party started." Then he crossed his arms and leaned back. Calculation started edging out the casual look in his eye. "So, Havoc Squad, huh? Pretty nice of Garza to loan us her very best. I'm – ah, excuse me." He took out his holo.

A young woman, also in street clothes, showed up. "Jonas! I just wanted to let you know I made it to Ithor safe and sound."

"That's great. I'll talk to you later, then." He hung up and winked at me. Or possibly at Dorne. "That's our cue. The target is in the vault. Are you ready to move out?"

"Havoc Squad is always ready." Corny, maybe, but I liked the sound of it.

"Take care of the droid and we'll have you on your way within the hour. Nice and tidy. Good luck. We'll have our eyes on you."

---

That vault run was weirder than anything I could even invent.

It was tucked into a maze of Nar Shaddaa's less glamorous-looking avenues. Like the less pleasant areas of Coruscant, I guess, but with even more interesting stains on the floor.

I made sure the outside perimeter was clear before I spoke, and even then I was quiet. "I've got a feeling about this. What do you want to bet this isn't as simple as a grab-and-go 'within the hour'?"

"Betting against that? On Nar Shaddaa, no less? I didn't wake up on the stupid side of the bed this morning, sir." Jorgan nodded at the door. "Let's go."

We headed in to find a crate-cluttered room where a sleek battle droid stood in the middle of a busy group of men in Republic uniforms. As Jorgan, Dorne and myself entered, the men gave us suspicious looks, exchanged rapid signals, and kept on working. All but the droid, who was facing a guy with captain's insignia.

"We're wasting time," the droid announced. "There is an entire galaxy full of depraved lunatics plotting against our great Republic, and we're busy rummaging for valuables!"

Well, there went Garza's request to have the droid's connection with the Republic kept quiet.

The captain sounded annoyed. "Be patient, Forex – black ops aren't cheap. Commander Tavus needs us to be resourceful."

"But I've been operational for days now! Imperial vermin across the galaxy should be cursing the Republic ingenuity that created me!"

I had to step in. "Uh, you. You know you're not actually serving the Republic, right?"

The robot whirred. "Contact! Multiple armed subjects!"

"Engage and terminate!" snapped the captain.

"Negative," proclaimed the droid. "Subject identity confirmed – officer, Republic Army. A valued ally in our battle against tyranny!"

The captain made a face. "Great." Then he glared at me. "Look, this is a top secret mission. Commander Tavus sent us himself. Does 'Havoc Squad Commander Tavus' mean anything to you?"

"More than you know. Drop your weapon."

Even if I'd thought this guy was legit Republic, the look on his face then would've convinced me otherwise. "Forex, secure the package and follow me," he said quickly. "The rest of you, gun this scum down and rendezvous with us at Objective Seven."

The droid gestured in an agitated way. "Negative! What you suggest is an act of betrayal, the murder of fellow – "

"M1-4X Override Code Five Five Eight! Secure the objective and follow me, now!"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Problem. "I'm your commanding officer," I told the droid. "Ignore this man's orders."

"Negative." It almost sounded sad. "Override code condition five five eight. Obey only orders given by Commander Harron Tavus or personnel designated by same."



“He designated me for a lot of tasks. I was in his squad, for stars’ sake.”

“The access list for my command set does not include you, sir.”

“M1-4X!” snapped the captain, and bolted. The droid followed.

After that, the rest of the uniformed men came after us. There are very few things I like less than having to harm my own people; I held the thought that their Republic uniforms were fakes. They were either defectors or straight-up Imps. I shoot Imps. So I took cover and fired.

We got home. We reported everything except the identity of the droid’s handlers. Then we returned to the ship. Making the military pay for bunks on planet to save us half an hour’s commute was...tempting, but Dorne opened her mouth to object and I just couldn’t deal with that right then.

We rested on the ship.

#### **4. Nar Shaddaa: Signed, Sealed, and...Score!**

She waylaid me on my way out of the cargo bay. She had a datapad. She always had a datapad.

“Sir, if you would—”

“Yeah.” You could cut her Imperial accent with a knife. I wanted to.

Dorne half offered the pad, but didn’t quite let go of it. “There are three forms, be sure to review them all—”

As if I couldn’t figure it out from the first dozen times she gave me these collections. “You want me to put my holosignature on a stamp, just use that twenty times a day instead of coming to me?”

“Sir,” she primmed, “it’s imperative that you personally acknowledge your cognizance of these matters as per—”

“I’m paying attention.” I cut her off, took hold of the datapad in her hands, and deliberately removed it from her grip. Then I took a few seconds to pay attention to the actual material I was supposed to be signing. That wasn’t the stuff I worried

about watching, but I'd damn well rather keep on top of it than let her think I wasn't doing my job. "Sergeant."

She seemed to jump a little, straighten even further, when I signed off and handed the datapad back to her. "Thank you, sir."

"Dismissed." My favorite part of our conversations: them ending.

---

It looked to be quiet while we waited for the SIS to do their SIS thing. The military I could understand: it was a cleaned-up resistance with better resources and more documentation. The intelligence community? They were a big question mark.

I called Kirsk.

It whirred gently a few times before he answered, but he showed up looking healthy. Rumpled, but healthy.

"What time is it?" he said cheerfully.

"Uh, sixteen hundred standard."

"I think it's three here." He blinked and looked around. "Three what, I'm not sure. Say, what's up?"

"How's your arm?"

"Oh, that? Fine. I can feel all my fingers and everything."

"Be sure to leave that review for your doctor."

"Please." He grinned. "Anyway, Nar Shaddaa's been great. You should come."

"You're kidding."

"No, you should."

"I'm already there. But the job's keeping me busy."

“What, so you’re too busy for family now?”

Ouch. Right in the hopeless, obvious weak spot.

Kirsk grinned broadly. “Get a move on. Game’s at seven. Bring your friends.”

“Not likely.”

\*

Nobody does sports bars like Nar Shaddaa does sports bars.

One whole wall was a holoscreen, which was less useful than you might think because of the patrons and the waitresses and the dancers and the beer fountain in the way. They still had a bunch of overhead screens, with subtle holo overlays of more dancers over the actual Huttball action. The neon trim on every edge in the room would’ve been blinding, except the screens themselves were brighter.

“Welcome,” said Kirsk, gesturing broadly, “to the sole bastion of Nikto Fever fans in the galaxy.”

“Don’t they have any on Nikto?”

“Kintan, you mean. And knowing Fever’s record? I don’t think so.”

The place was full fit to burst, but Kirsk led me right over to the bar and, through a stream of Huttese too rapid to follow, freed up seats for himself and me. We ordered up some beer and, at Kirsk’s insistence, fried grease sticks. This cantina was the first place I’d found since I left my home sector that did grease sticks right. Kirsk waggled his eyebrows and smiled proudly when I told him so.

The holocasters finished up the team overviews in time for kickoff. The noise level in the cantina lowered, very very slightly, as a few of us shut up to sit and anticipate. The Nikto Fever was up against the Ghests from Rodia; they were just about the second worst in the Rimward League, so we had a chance. Maybe.

The game hadn’t made it through three (surprisingly good) plays when Kirsk punched me. “Forgot. Here.” He handed me a little flexiplast headband.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Do it.”

“We’ll be seen.”

“Take a look around, big brother.”

I did. Everyone in the place was wearing a holohat, or holding a pennant – a cute rendition of what the championship pennant would be if the Nikto Fever had ever won one – or at the very least drinking from a mug with big plastoid Nikto-style face frills coming off the sides.

“Put it on, flip the switch,” urged Kirsik.

“How come you get the relatively normal-looking pennant-waving part of this arrangement?”

“Because I set this night up. Nikto hat. On. Now.”

“No.”

“If you fail to wear that, and we lose, it’ll be your fault.”

“We’ll lose anyway.”

About half a dozen people within earshot turned to glare at me.

“Okay, okay!” I put the hat on. And flicked it on. And tried not to think about the ferocious Nikto face now being projected over my head. Worth it, I thought, if the team managed to score anything good tonight.

\*

Halftime. I don’t even want to go into the details of the game so far.

“Why did we ever like this team, anyway?” I asked Kirsik.

“Your fault. You fixated on that blonde runner they traded for a few years back, Lenna Dray? Converted wholesale just for her. You had it bad.”

“That is definitely not how it happened. You probably tried to infect our house with Fever on a bet or something.”

“Nope. It was your hopeless, eternal devotion to her right up ‘til her injuries took her out of the game. We all had to cheer with you or else you’d beat us up.”

“When did my beating you up ever convince you of anything? You chose to be here today, little brother.”

“Because of your years of bullying. Monster.”

“Hey, half’s starting. We’ll turn this around.”

We started out okay, as we usually do. In fact, the place was up for a legitimate cheer before too long, and it was one I knew from back home. It eventually came around to me yelling along with “Smash their runners, crush their guard, Nikto Fever rocks you – I am going to die of shame right here.”

Kirsk finished the chant and then shot me a weird look. “Uh, screwed that one up, Vierce.”

“No.” I nodded toward the door.

Sergeant Jorgan stepped in and strolled up to us with that horribly feral grin of his. “Took me quite a while to track you down, sir,” he said. “I truly do not know where to start.”

Kirsk waved genially. “Start by making fun of him for being unable to commit to two full lines of a proper chant.”

“Shut up, Kirsk. Jorgan, this is my brother. I don’t actually know him and I don’t know why he kidnapped me and brought me here. Kirsk, Sergeant Jorgan, who is going to be very quiet if he knows what’s good for him.”

Jorgan looked around. His eyes eventually settled on my hat. “I always knew you had secrets, Savins, but this...the Nikto Fever?”

“If word of this gets out, they won’t find enough of you to file a death certificate.”

Kirsk piped up. “So you gonna pull up a chair or what?”

There was a long, very tense moment.

Jorgan's yellow eyes gleamed in the shifting light. Then he stepped in and signaled the bartender for a beer. "Been meaning to see whether that new offensive guard lives up to the hype anyway." He looked up at the screen and pretended he wasn't speaking to us. "We're never talking about this after tonight, Savins."

## 5. Nar Shaddaa: The Droid Delinquent

"So exactly how long are we not going to say we know anything about the fact that those were Republic spec ops we were fighting, sir?"

I glowered at Jorgan. "As long as SIS keeps asking. We've got our orders: say nothing about the defections. I don't see why SIS needs to know."

"If they're risking their necks getting information on that droid, I think they deserve to know why it's here."

"I don't want Garza chewing my head off for 'I think they deserve,' not like this."

"The other reason I was thinking to talk," said Jorgan, "is it might be a worthwhile exchange if Balkar thinks looking up the Deadeyes is an imposition."

"We give him answers on what's really behind M1-4X, and in exchange he finds you your in for your old squad?"

"That's it. Your call...but like I said, I think they deserve it anyway."

He had a point. And Garza's orders could change in light of new information.

"Yeah. If it'll help, you make that trade."

He nodded. "Thanks."

That's when Balkar himself flickered up on holo. "Gentlemen, I have just finagled you invitations to the penthouse at the Club Vertica Casino. All kinds of Imperial security, but you can stroll in any time you like, meet whoever or whatever has been transmitting our droid friend's orders. The, ah, Imperial hosts may not appreciate your visit. But they don't want to be the ones to break the peace in Hutt territory." He flashed me an easygoing smile. "Neither do we."

“Got it,” I growled. Never mind that there was no peace with Imps, anywhere, ever. If they didn’t want an incident I could deliver no incident.

Probably.

“Hey, Jorgan?” I muttered.

“Sir?”

“When we get there, you do the talking.”

---

Jorgan, Dorne and I got some funny looks walking across the Club Vertica casino floor in full armor, but I kept my hands off my weapons and nobody tried to slow us down on the way to the lift. In fact, we did make it clear through the doors of the eye-meltingly brightly lit penthouse.

The Imps inside were uniformed and armed themselves. A guy with major’s rank bars turned around when he heard us. “Who the...impossible. Throw down your weapons, Republic scum! You have no idea what you’ve done, breaking in here.”

“We’re just here to talk,” Jorgan said calmly. I mentally rehearsed the motions that would get the rifle out and firing in under a second flat. “If we wanted you dead we’d have just slagged the whole place.” Troop disposition within the room indicated a thermal detonator plus rolling for cover would neutralize more hostiles more quickly. Jorgan’s voice went on, steady, almost soothing. “Mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“You don’t get to ask anything. Men, subdue these intruders. Use whatever force is—”

The big holo beside the Imperial major flared and brought up the sour-looking captain I had seen with M1-4X earlier. “Zardres, this is Andrik. We’ve got the last package, and we’re heading for objecti—” Then he noticed us. “Oh. Oh, this is too much.”

“Shut up, Andrik,” snapped the major. “Can’t you see we have a situation here?”

“Andrik,” I said. Maybe I couldn’t play nice with Imps but I could still taunt trash. “Is this any way to let your bosses treat you?”

He sneered. “Tavus is my boss. These Imps are just middle management. Soon-to-be-dead middle management, I’m guessing. Have fun dying, Zardres.”

“Please,” snorted Zardres, but he was sweating. “We’ll have the situation dealt with in mere moments.”

“Nah. In mere moments you’ll be dead, and the situation will be headed my way. Nice knowing you.”

Andrik gave Havoc Squad a last cold look. The holo turned off.

I really, really wanted to prove Andrik right in his prediction. Then again, Andrik didn’t deserve that kind of support, and I wasn’t supposed to shoot first. “Would you believe,” I said to Zardres, “that this is the one day so far this year I’m under orders not to kill scum like you on sight? Tempting though Andrik’s suggestion was. Could you just tell us where to find that war droid and his idiot handlers?”

“Are you insane? Why would I even consider telling you? Andrik may be scum, but his droid’s activities are useful to the Empire. I cannot allow you to impede their work.”

“The droid is Andrik’s, not your Empire’s,” said Jorgan, “and you can bet he’ll turn it on you the next time he thinks the winds are changing. Every credit, man, and minute you spend protecting him is a waste.”

Zardres’ lip twitched. “You’re not far wrong,” he grumbled. “If you think you can stop him...well, I for one won’t miss him. You will find Captain Andrik and M1-4X in a facility deep within the Shadow Town district, unlocking the droid’s full potential. That machine’s power core is capable of far more than your scientists thought possible. Soon, M1-4X will have shields and weapons more powerful than any other droid ever created.”

“Much obliged.” I tried a grin. It probably wasn’t a nice one. “I hope we meet again sometime, Major Zardres. Under less neutral circumstances.”



The Imp sneered. "You have what you wanted. Leave before I change my mind. Oh, and tell Captain Andrik that it was nice knowing him, too."

I turned and headed out without a word, Jorgan and Dorne falling in behind me.

"That was very nearly painless," Dorne said as we reached the lift. She sounded surprised as well as relieved.

"That's what was so disappointing about it," I said quietly. "Hey, Jorgan?"

"Sir?"

"Remind me again why breaking the treaty is a bad thing?"

"The Treaty of Coruscant's just part of the disaster here, Savins. If we piss off the Hutts by getting blood on their carpet, High Command'll never find us for the court-martial."

---

I walked into the SIS office and tossed Balkar a datapad with the coordinates for the Shadow Town facility. "Tell me what I need to know," I said.

He looked at the map on the datapad screen, then back at me. "Fantastic work! Shadow Town opens up some possibilities. It's is where the Imps put people who are too useful to kill, but too dangerous to leave roaming around the galaxy. It's dangerous and heavily secured. On the other hand, there's a lot of looking-the-other-way there. If fighting happens, the Hutts won't interfere, not in Shadow Town."

"Music to my ears."

"There are a couple of matters standing there...but M1-4X is your priority today. How about you go scrap it and we all go home happy?"

---

Shadow Town had heavy defenses, both code-locked doors and angry staff. Nothing we couldn't deal with. Some SIS backup came with us as we made our way to the building near the edge of the complex that was supposed to contain

the droid. The staff vanished once we got in; M1-4X was likely kept secret even to most of the Imps.

Our Captain Andrik was there along with a few of the Republic uniformed guys. He turned to give us a sneering once-over. "So you made it. A little later than I was expecting, to be honest. Did it really take you that long to wipe out Zardres and his men? Maybe you're not as good as I'd thought you were."

"Good enough to stop you, Andrik."

"You idiot. You've killed good men to get this far – fellow soldiers! All because some scumbag on Coruscant said they were traitors? Your loyalties are all wrong. When you're bleeding out in a trench on some muckball planet, it ain't High Command that pulls you out – it's the guy next to you."

"You betrayed the Republic. It doesn't matter what your reasons were."

"Blind," he snarled. "Blind and stupid. I'll bet you can't even imagine doing something you weren't ordered to do."

The big droid M1-4X spoke up from its charging station or whatever that apparatus by the wall was. "Treacherous vermin," it yelled. "I have completed the charging process. All systems operable."

Andrik gave me a nasty smile. "Sounds like your time's up, Lieutenant. Any last words?"

M1-4X waved at me. "Lieutenant! You made it! I knew this Imp-loving scum could never escape the sure justice of the Republic for long."

"Uh, good to see you," I told him. "You still working for this guy?"

"Unfortunately, I am still bound by my programming to obey Captain Andrik. The coward has naturally ordered me to kill you. To be used this way against the finest agents of my beloved Republic shames me. I wish I had never been activated."

"Me too," I muttered. Then, out loud, "Your orders are straight-up treason. Why follow them?"

M1-4X shook his shiny droid head. "It is in my programming. The Republic's brilliant scientists clearly had no reason to expect such sedition."

"Enough chatter," said Andrik. "Attack."

M1-4X raised a pair of blaster rifles and what appeared to be a shoulder-mounted missile turret. "Lieutenant, be advised your weapon will require several decades of sustained fire to penetrate my shields at their current charge. Seeing as Republic SpecForce training is the best in the galaxy, I'm confident you'll find an alternative solution for my destruction. Good luck!"

I couldn't immediately think of language strong enough for what I thought of this weird situation and its weird murder droid, so instead I dove for cover. Arcs of electricity jumped from the wall to the droid as it maneuvered into position. All coming from the charging station. Maybe his shiny power source wasn't so self-contained after all, not yet.

I signaled Jorgan and the SIS people to keep the traitors busy while I opened fire on the apparatus at the wall. Better than denying power, the thing blew up with more force than I would've given it credit for. M1-4X briefly froze.

"Hit it," I yelled.

The thing about droids is it's often hard to tell where the critical parts are. A CPU can be hidden anywhere and a power core, even though it's larger, can usually choose from among a few hiding spots. M1-4X was built on a weird open model, though, with few places to hide. Perhaps with those shields of his he wasn't supposed to worry about it.

But when the shields were overloaded there was only one place to shoot, and all three of us slammed it. Soon enough something blew out and its weaponry slumped to a stop.

The SIS around us formed up the moment the defectors were down. Their leader spoke up: "Lieutenant. Status?"

I looked at their medic and jerked my head toward Jorgan, who was scowling and applying pressure to some kind of leg wound. "See to it. As far as the droid goes,

the power core is supposed to be special, make sure to snag it. After that, I think we go home.”

## 6. Nar Shaddaa: Brothers

I went to Mama as soon as I heard.

The city was a little hot by then. I was eighteen years old and wanted in every Imperial database that had an entry for Kegled II. I wasn't scarred by then but I was still big enough to be seen...well, everywhere.

The Imps had banned hoods and face coverings. Lucky me, I would be wanted with or without one, so I went with one. I knew every Imp patrol from Ridgeside to Central. And I could slip in when I needed to.

Mama wasn't at the shop. I checked the back door to be sure, then headed back to the house. The city was crawling around it but it stood among a few holdouts with their neat front lawns and tiny front gardens. It was a good block to live on. Someday when all this was over I'd live there again. Ten days or months or years or decades - whatever it took.

My keycard still worked. Mama had sent me a new one via a resistance courier the one time she'd had to change the locks. I let myself in, closed the door, and took a deep breath. No one saw me yet. I would just have to get away from the front windows; they had small stained glass panels but you never knew how close an observer might get.

Home. Dark hardwood, faded but clean paisley carpeting, the quiet hum of a trundling cleaning droid forming the background of a life. I half expected Kirsk to come running 'round the corner.

Well, wasn't that the problem?

I pulled down my hood and finger-combed my hair back. “Mama?” I said loudly.

She surged into the hallway from the kitchen, short and roundish and exhausted-looking. “Vierce,” she breathed. “Get in here.”

I checked the windows and made the motion quick. I hugged her, hard, and felt her clinging back, before I backed off and edged into the doorway to the basement. Not much of me would show from the windows.

“What happened?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Two nights ago Kirsk didn’t come back.” And I hadn’t been there to help, damn it all. “He was going to the spaceport to meet a friend. I didn’t see this until past midnight.” She pulled out her holo and brought up Kirsk, his brand-new cheek implant gleaming.

“Hey Mama,” he said cheerfully. “Some things have come up and I think I can do us some good. Not here. Tell Vierce he’s an idiot. Don’t hold up dinner for me.”

I stared at his little likeness, frozen in the final moment of the recording. “Is that all he has to say for himself?”

“What does it mean? He didn’t go to you.”

“No. He didn’t. Off planet, maybe?”

“But why?”

“Because he doesn’t want to deal with this anymore?” Oh, how nice it must be, to be able to walk away. Vierce considered space as distant a subject as subatomic physics. It wasn’t for him. “You know he never...I mean, bending over for Imps was never one of his strong points.”

“Mind your imagery,” said Mama. “I just don’t know...why. Hardly any of his things are missing. His holo, maybe some clothes. Wouldn’t he take more if he were going somewhere he meant to go?”

“‘Dropping everything’ seems about right for him.”

“I guess.” She sighed. “I guess.”

The front doorbell rang.

Mama looked immediately to the little holoprojector in the corner next to the blender. It was showing our visitor on the front stoop: an Imp.

“No,” I whispered. “Do you want me to kill him?”

Her green-brown eyes widened. “Maker, no. He won’t harm me if I cooperate. Go on outside, Vierce. I’ll tell you as soon as I hear something.”

“Okay.” She was right. An Imp dying on her doorstep would just get her hurt or, worse, jailed. I nodded and slipped out the back door. My heart sank to hear the quiet tone of the door locking.

There was no good vantage point where I could see the stoop without someone seeing me. I waited outside the kitchen, unwilling to leave and unable to get closer.

That’s when she ushered him into the kitchen. There the two of them were. She was short, with a few greys lacing through her hair, and dressed with an eye to comfort over fashion, and he was Imperial in uniform. I took aim. She would kill me if I broke the window after she told me not to shoot, but she would be alive to kill me.

She was talking. The soldier held up a holo of Kirsk and I understood even if he didn’t that that was her proof he was still out of their hands. She started crying and shaking her head. He kept talking for a while and she kept shaking her head. At one point she gestured toward the kettle. The soldier rolled his eyes and left. I darted around to see him head down the road.

I keyed back into the back door. “Mama, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” she said, a little breathlessly. “Every time they come in...it’s best you were out, Vierce. They don’t know where he went. They want him, they didn’t say for what. If he’s gone...it might be off planet. And it might be for a long time.” She screwed her eyes shut. “Maker help us, that might be for the best.”

I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed. “We’ll find him, Mama. That’s a promise.” Though what I was going to do about it from the resistance headquarters was more than I could figure. Get rid of the Imps, I guessed. Everything else followed.

~~~

Six years and multiple reunions later...

I picked my brother up from a rooftop on Nar Shaddaa. Somehow in the space of six hours' absence he had managed to get in trouble. No, I don't know what was going on there. Sometimes with Kirsk it's better not to ask.

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. None of us had forgotten the uncomfortable revelation of Huttball Nikto Fever fandom.

"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, incentivize me a little harder, 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.” He looked down where Dorne had vanished. “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 polite façade 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 since her head’s still attached I can guess.”

“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 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.”

He beamed. "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, Kirsik 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." She sounded like the wind had been knocked clean out of her. I had physically seen her get the wind knocked out of her and she hadn't seemed this distressed. "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."

Dorne found her voice a moment later. "...You will, sir?"

“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.” And he said nothing more about it.

The meeting was halfway around the moon and I spent every minute wondering what they were getting up to. But they showed up at the rendezvous I’d dictated, Elara’s boyish-looking counterpart and three Imps who looked like they’d seen their own ghosts. It went well, I guess. I didn’t talk. Dorne and...Dorne, I guess...did. He sounded eager to join the Republic. Any rat on a sinking ship

would. But I kept my mouth shut, Kirsk occasionally touched my arm as if to ground the growing charge, and Dorne with Imperial hangers-on agreed to step one.

Havoc-Dorne and I handled the call to Coruscant to initiate the defection process. They said it would be 36 hours before personnel came to pick the new guys up and orient them. Dorne immediately asked whether Personnel Division would grant a waiver to allow her to talk to her brother in the interim. I wondered why she hadn't waited on that to start with.

Then again, if one was going to talk about doing dumb things for brothers...

She was standing in front of me again. "I believe everything is in order, sir," she said. "I'll register a suite where they can rest. I...would like to request your presence, to verify that everything is in order."

Thirty-six hours in a sea of Imperial accents. I'd had prison terms that were more fun than that. But I was already far, far too deep in this to get out by backpedaling. "Yeah," I said.

If I weren't glaring past her head, which I one hundred per cent was, I might have noticed that her eyes were sparkling. "Thank you, sir."

"Least I could do."

As the cautious good cheer washed around me I reflected that Kirsk was an idiot. But it was way too late to shut him up now.

7. Nar Shaddaa: Recruiting the Droid

"Lieutenant!" The glib warmth of Balkar's manner when we first met had given way to respect. After his mission support I was inclined to return it. "Walk with us. There's something I want you to see before you ship out."

We talked about nothing important while we walked through the crowded spaceport. Then he rounded a corner and brought us into a smallish warehouse or a biggish supply room.

Where M1-4X was standing, shining in a fresh paint job with Republic-insignia overlays.

The missile turrets weren't out and Balkar seemed pretty relaxed. In fact, he took out a datapad and read off "Republic war droid M1-4X is to be repaired and direct control transferred to Havoc Squad's current commanding officer immediately."

"Balkar. You shouldn't have." I paused. "Seriously, I don't know what other surprises he's been programmed with."

M1-4X waved. "I assure you, sir, my loyalty to the Republic is unshakeable!"

"We wiped him, gave him a more trustworthy system image we, ah, recovered from early design sources."

"And the rest? How did you even...?"

"Apparently you weren't nearly as thorough as you could've been." I think that smile actually qualified as roguish. "You really ought to be ashamed of yourself."

I frowned. "I knew I should've brought the flamethrower."

"We don't have a flamethrower, sir," said Jorgan.

In fact we didn't. "Let's get the honorary supply officer on that, eh?"

"I'd love to see what she lists as a justification."

"Should be good. Now. This." I took a step toward the war droid, which still didn't seem inclined to kill me. So far so good.

"Unit M1-4X reporting for duty!" said the droid.

"Uh, welcome to Havoc Squad."

"I must say, Lieutenant, I'm very pleased to see you again. Your work in disabling me was incredible. Republic soldiers obviously are the best in the galaxy." He bowed. He actually bowed. "It will be an honor to fight alongside such an exceptional servant of the Republic. Together we will crush the mindless hedonists of the Sith Empire!"

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or...well, laugh. I suppressed the urge, anyway. "You and me are going to get along," I said.

Balkar spoke up. "It's been a pleasure, Lieutenant. Sergeant." He nodded at Jorgan. "I hope next time we meet I'll have something more for you."

Jorgan nodded back. "Just get me a direction. I'll do the rest."

"Come on, Forex," I said. "Let's show you around the ship."

"It will be a pleasure to return to the service of freedom and democracy, sir!"

No matter how bouncy his enthusiasm, I didn't laugh. "We're glad to have you."

"Sir."

I looked up from my console. Jorgan was leaning in the doorway.

"Jorgan," I said.

"What do you think of the new guy?"

"I think Forex is amazing. I had no idea you could put that much personality in a droid and still have room for missile turrets."

"Hm," he half laughed. "That's so. Impressive tech overall, and quick on orders. Should be good for us."

"Absolutely."

"I'm curious how things'll work in the field. Every new addition changes the dynamic. Sets our style slightly different."

"Yeah, I know." I hated it when he got pedantic. He knew my background, already knew I was a veteran. This could only mean he was angling toward something.

"And this may come as a surprise, but I'm pretty sure you're up for adapting to it. You've done better than I expected with that, all in all."

"This is your way of jabbing me about Sergeant Dorne, isn't it. You are not starting this." He did something once or twice a week that was a roundabout way of prodding me to make Sergeant Dorne part of the team. Rah rah, Havoc spirit, or something.

"I'm just saying. We're functioning as a unit a lot better than I feared when I found out this woman you think is your archnemesis was coming on board."

"She's not my archnemesis. Archnemesises...is...are unique, or at least uncommon. She's one of billions."

"She's on our side, and she's got the skills to hold her own. Which is good. Havoc needs to be at full strength. And I'm glad you've been all right about letting her work."

"Well, thank you very much for that pat on the back. Anything else you want to cover, Sergeant Warm Fuzzies?"

"I thought we might invite her next time we're out for dinner."

"You already invite her every time. She's always busy with her reading."

"We might invite, Savins. It'd mean something coming from you."

"I would rather bring Forex to the cantina than her."

Jorgan shrugged, unruffled. "We can invite him too. Make it a welcome party or something. Just ask her. Just the once."

"I don't want to be her buddy, Jorgan. There's nights I just play her voice over in my head so I can practice not wanting to shoot in its direction when I hear her accent in combat. When the firing starts...you have no idea. That's not the stuff friendships are made of."

"Well, you're not shooting her when you hear her accent in combat, so something's working, at least."

"Anybody ever tell you you're a terrible ambassador for unit cohesiveness? I don't get it. You're the guy who went out of your way to piss me off, for weeks, when we started working together."

He suddenly got shifty-eyed. “Yeah, well, you rubbed me the wrong way.”

“So get off my case about her rubbing me the wrong way!”

“Furthermore,” he said loudly, “I didn’t think you had the discipline to hold a real squad together. Which is why I stay on your case about it.”

“You want to talk about happy squads, friends getting along, we can reprogram Forex to sing holding-hands campfire songs. Actually, I would love to hear that done in his voice.”

“Yeah, well. Maybe screwing with him will give you something to do other than complaining about her. I’m looking forward to it.” He stood up straight. “About time we got some new blood in here in any case.”

“Droids don’t have blood, Jorgan.”

“You know what I mean, Savins.”

8. Interlude: The Sergeant and the Farmboy

I woke up in the makeshift hospital the resistance ran outside West Ford City. It had been thirty-five Imperials, give or take, since Illyris had been arrested and disappeared into the big Imperial prison of West Ford City. I wasn’t counting days just then. If I concentrated I could still feel her hair brushing my face, the back of my hand.

What is there to say? She was a student, brilliant, fearless. A resistance sympathizer and occasional combat support, one who could place a blaster bolt with the best of ‘em. She had this fine long hair, like white aurodium that’d flirted with gold just enough to keep the people who were truly dead to poetry from calling it colorless. There’ve been other girls, but never one quite like her. She wasn’t the one who should’ve been taken when the op went wrong.

Thirty-five Imperials later, give or take, and this op went wrong, too, and here I was, unable to feel half my face.

I blinked a bit with the eye that wasn't bandaged. There was somebody sitting by my cot.

"Mama?" I said. "You shouldn't be here."

"I got approval," she said sternly. She always did have a way of giving orders fifty times her size. "Lie back, Vierce."

"How'd the rest of us make out?"

"Kino and old Greggs died in that blast. Imperial losses at eight or more in addition to some equipment. The rest of our people got out...though I'm told they had to drag you away. You were going about half blind, putting blaster fire into any Imperial helmet you saw, whether it was moving or not."

"Oh."

The space where Illyris wasn't burned at me. People didn't leave the prison she'd gone into. We could only hope that when the occupation was gone we could sort out the...what was left. If I had been there in the team that got taken...but I wasn't.

"In fact, Vierce, they had to knock you out." Mama pushed her graying hair back. "It makes no sense to fight your own people like that."

"They were holding me back." I did remember that much.

"That's not the way these matters get solved."

"They get solved by me going out and fixing it, Mama."

She patted my hand softly, but there was nothing of gentleness on her face. "When your father died I wanted to avenge him. It ate at me night and day. I wanted to set it right, or at least hurt anyone who had ever had anything to do with it. But I couldn't. They were too big, I was too small. To try would have done nothing except get me killed."

I didn't answer that.

"Kirsk is gone," she said. "I've no way of knowing if he's ever coming back to this planet. And your father is long dead. You're all I have, Vierce."

"And what does she have now?" Death, probably quick, maybe not. I had no way of knowing. "Maybe I can't make all of them pay, but I have to do something."

"You'll do what you have to. I expect no less from my boy. But you listen to me." She gripped my hand harder and leaned in, driving each new word with a force I hadn't known her capable of. *"You do not have to die."*

I guess the look on her face then is what got me through the rest of it.

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*Six years later...*

"You never did tell me how you got so pretty," Jorgan said. We were doing a last rifle check before we went out on the hunt.

I raised a hand to the burn scars that stretched from temple to jaw on one side of my face. "Roadside bomb," I told him. That's what I tell everyone.

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I had met Sergeant Ava Jaxo on Coruscant. She was spec ops too, under Garza's command, and she had helped our sad little two-man squad the last time we were in the neighborhood. There was something about her voice I liked. It was hard to forget.

So when she dropped me a line asking if I could meet her on Coruscant for dinner, I went along with it. I hadn't dated much as a Republic recruit, but I guess a man has to start sometime. And she had a nice way about her.

Ava's apartment was furnished with playful style. A little heavy on the band posters, maybe, but it seemed to have a lot of the joy she did, and that's not a bad thing. I wasn't expecting a first date here. In her apartment. But, having given me directions without specifying, she seemed completely happy to have lured me inside.

“You’re staring,” she said, smiling. She had the kind of smile that walked up and hit you, every time. “And not at me. Come on in.”

She set a familiar hand on my arm as I walked in. I reminded myself not to mind. Physical contact is allowed on dates, or so they tell me. I could practically hear Kirsk laying down the rules normal people follow. Kirsk is much better at this than I am.

I raised the bottle I’d been carrying. Imported. All wine on Coruscant is imported. “I brought a little something.”

She lit up. “That’s so nice! Did you bring enough for two?” She started trying to peer around me as if expecting to find more.

“It’s all yours if that’s how you want it,” I said, a little nonplussed.

“Ha! That won’t be necessary.” She smiled. Her hair was down, black and lush. She was wearing a low-cut blouse and very fitted pants. I never really thought uniforms were unflattering before that moment when I saw the alternative. “Now, you came right on time, meaning the food’s not done yet. Come on.” She beckoned me into a cozy dining room. “I’ll have Two-Em bring it out when it’s ready.”

“A domestic droid? On our salary?”

“He’s a hand-me-down. Don’t hold it against him, he still cooks a mean steak. – You don’t mind meat?”

“Never.”

“That’s Havoc talking.” Again, the smile, smoky eyes just a little lidded. I didn’t remember to sit down until she did. “All right, big guy. You know, you’re pretty shy for a galactic hero.”

And I didn’t know her well enough to tell her why. “Forex tells me I should get out more. Something about setting an example for the Republic.”

She opened the bottle, poured for two. “It wouldn’t hurt the public discourse to see more of you.” Her gaze swept down and slowly up. “Just saying.”

I cleared my throat. "So are you from around here, originally?"

"Born, bred, and schooled. Third district region B-512 North Upper, reporting for duty." Ava laughed, the kind of laugh pitched for two. "Boring story followed by some service that I'm relieved to say has been pretty uneventful. Not like you. Way I heard it, you saw more action on Ord Mantell than the rest of us get in a whole tour."

"I am five kinds of not authorized to discuss it." I sipped. "Yeah. We saw some action."

"But you were a freedom fighter even before that. Kegled II, right?"

"Yeah," I said. "All my life, more or less."

"I can't imagine. I'm not surprised your side ended up winning, though."

"Oh?"

"It had you on it, silly." She laughed. "Don't play dumb when a girl's trying to compliment you."

"I don't meet a lot of women who try to compliment me." I didn't touch my scarred face. I figured I didn't need to. I did, however, take another drink.

Ava smiled. "Is that so, hmm? Not a lot of competition? Good."

"Hm." I leaned forward, propping my chin on my hand, and gave her face a real look. "If this is some plot of Jorgan's I am going to kill him. But not 'til after the date's over."

"If this were some plot of Jorgan's I would absolutely play along, just for the chance," she said slyly. I decided I could listen to that voice narrate anything. "Oh! Here it is."

The thing that marched in from the kitchen bearing two loaded plates had once been humanoid. It was missing its head. A small blinking array of sensors ran on a circle around where its neck should be.

"Two-Em, I presume?" I said, if only to cover the weirdness of the moment.



“My trusty household droid.” She was unselfconsciously refilling my glass. “Don’t mention his little, uh, quirk. He gets upset.”

“Does he have a vocabulator to complain with?”

The droid set down the plates, then pounded its chest. “Yes,” said its chest in a high-pitched voice.

“All right,” said Ava, “stop scaring the guests. Thanks, Two-Em.”

The droid bowed, a strangely stumpy action, and returned to the kitchen.

“At least you know he’s unique,” I said.

She laughed. “Eat up. A man like you has got to go through groceries like tissue paper.”

The food was good. I told her so in the spare moments between bites. She seemed happy. The wine was all right, too.

And I was getting nervous.

“Come over here,” she said, as Two-Em came out to clean up. She brought me back out to the couch and sat down. “Let’s get comfortable.”

It’s not that I’m not interested in women. I am. I just prefer the ones I know. And while Ava was chewing through the getting-to-know process at a fantastic rate, I just...don’t touch people, not unless I’m sure. A guy my size can get misinterpreted very easily.

All of this was in mind as I sat and she settled hip to hip. “Ava, I—”

She touched her finger to my lips. “Bad boy. Not necessary.”

“I think—”

And then she was pushing up and I was not, not reacting badly, just stay calm, and she was kissing me in this way that made it impossible not to answer. No woman’s ever kissed me like that. I let her lean into me, wrapped my arms around her slim waist, gentle enough not to scare, firm enough to let her know I meant it.

She slipped her tongue in for just a moment. I suppressed the groan but let the gasp through. She laughed throatily and set her hands to exploring my face and hair.

I stopped her. My heart was pounding so hard my ears were ringing. "Ava," I said, already kicking myself for stopping. "Listen, I...I mean, if I see you again...that is...I don't usually..."

She leaned back and arched her eyebrows. "Why, Lieutenant. Are you sounding the retreat?"

She even said "Lieutenant" the right way. "Not yet?" I said weakly. "I'm sorry. I just don't so soon." By then I was just dripping words without understanding them.

She sat back with a little exhalation that told me I was in trouble. She smiled, probably insincerely. "That is so sweet," she said.

It was? "What, that I prefer a second date first?"

"I think it's adorable." She reached up and up to finger-comb my hair into place. I felt it all over when her fingertips touched. "You've got to be careful with your heart, farmboy."

She was nothing if not pleasing, and I'd had a really, really good dinner and company, but the name rubbed me the wrong way. "I'm from a city, you know."

"On Kegled? Did your city have a bunch of traffic lights about yea tall that say 'moo'? Because if so, I hate to break it to you, you're a farmboy."

"Oh, laugh now." I grinned, the better to take the offensive. "Where did you say you were from? The bright center of the universe?"

She trailed a hand down my chest - an instantly compelling maneuver, which she had to know - and smirked. "Only because I was in it."

This crazy corner of my mind said I could stay there. Said I could let go and drop into her world, the impossible one where people did just what they wanted without fear of loss.

But an upbringing's a hard thing to shake. It was nice to be wanted but she was still a woman I barely knew. Maybe sometime soon she'd be more. But not tonight.

"I had a great time," I said, honestly. "I hope it wasn't a waste of yours."

"Are you kidding? My curiosity is completely piqued. And when we do see each other..."

I needed to end this on a high note. I pulled her in and kissed her, carefully. She kept her hands low on my belly, not so much a stopping gesture as a promising one.

Before the panic could catch up I broke free and stood. "I'll be seeing you," I rasped, my voice having taken a temporary vacation.

She was still composing herself. She managed another sly smile. "I can't wait, farmboy."

I walked out. I don't think normal people shake that much after a date. Well, there was a reason I hadn't been on one for so long. Next time. Was she the right woman? Maybe, maybe not. I could give her that chance.

Later. Stars above...later.

## **9. Tatooine: Wraiths and Shadows**

The call for the next step finally came in. The next step against the commander who had set the wholesale defection of old Havoc into motion. And carried it every step of the way.

I quietly signaled the crew while I brought Garza up on the main holo. She started in right away. "Lieutenant. I've just received some intelligence that I want Havoc to act on immediately. It's Tavus."

My stomach tied up.

“He and a team of commandos just raided a Republic research center on Cularin and stole a prototype cloaking device. But the prototype contains a tracking beacon. We now know the exact location of Tavus’s ship. This is it, Lieutenant.”

“Excellent. I can move on his location immediately, General.”

“Tavus’s ship is currently sitting alone in an empty sector of space – most likely waiting to rendezvous with a larger vessel. You have to get there before that happens, Lieutenant.”

“Consider it done.”

“This is Harron Tavus himself, Lieutenant.” Like I needed the emphasis. “Succeed here, and everything else becomes an afterthought.”

“I won’t fail,” I told her.

“That’s why I’m sending you. Be sure to secure the prototype cloaking device after you’ve dealt with Tavus. If it fell into the Empire’s hands, it could be...disastrous. I’m transmitting the coordinates to you now. Effect entry to Tavus’s ship, then do whatever is necessary to neutralize him and retrieve the prototype. Good hunting – Garza out.”

I turned to my squad. “Well, that’s a trap.”

“Yes, sir,” said Jorgan.

“Let’s slam it.”

He grinned slyly. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, sir!” echoed M1-4X.

“Yes, sir,” Dorne said quietly, but I couldn’t tell whether she was just muttering it to fit in or what.

\*

The ship was abandoned. I mean practically drifting, alone in the middle of nowhere, with no response to our approach, no resistance to our docking, no crew. I almost declined to board. The place was probably rigged to explode.

But I had to get that cloaking device.

We stayed tightly grouped as we searched the place, room by room, until we came upon a chamber crisscrossed by brilliantly glowing forcefield walls.

“That’s probably it, sir,” said Jorgan.

The console by the wall was beeping.

“This is somebody’s idea of theatrics,” I said. “Great.”

“Means they won’t kill us yet,” said Jorgan.

“A lesser man would consider you a morale liability, Jorgan.”

I hit the console. Right on cue, Commander Tavus’s image came up.

And he was ready to ramble. “It’s good to see you again, Lieutenant. It is lieutenant now, right? You’re doing so well for yourself – I’m very proud. I have to thank you for working this little meeting into your very busy schedule. It took me some trouble to arrange.”

“You could’ve just called me, you know. I’d be happy to see you again.”

“I’m afraid I’m some distance away at the moment – and coming in person would waste your precious time. You have caused me a great deal of difficulty, Lieutenant. Some have even called you my nemesis. Was that your goal?”

“I would really need a better man than you for a nemesis. I’m here for justice. What’ve you got?”

“My goal – our goal – is to fight injustice. To destroy the greatest murderers of all. Needles, Gearbox – they were heroes, Lieutenant!”

“Your squadmates betrayed the Republic. Just like you.”

“You’re a fool!” He paused, composed himself. “In my entire career, only one other enemy has been as difficult as you: the Imperial Shadow Fist. One of the most elite commando units in all of the Sith Empire. Five of the Emperor’s deadliest agents.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Havoc Squad and the Shadow Fist fought many times, Lieutenant. We battled to a standstill over and over again. We were the worst of enemies. But times have changed. Meet my five newest friends.”

It was halfway through that last sentence that I snapped “Cover” and let my squad scatter. People started dropping out of stealth around us.

Tavus kept talking. “You’re overdue for a painful death, Lieutenant. Goodbye.”

Was this Shadow Fist tough? Yes. Were we tougher? Yes. I’m used to scrapping in warehouses and other busy indoor locations. Jorgan’s used to kicking ass. M1-4X is used to being indestructible. I still wasn’t quite sure what Dorne was used to, but winning appeared to factor into it.

Still, in the end, we didn’t have Tavus.

“Grab their tags and let’s get this cloaking device out of here,” I ordered. “As traps go, this wasn’t that bad.”

Dorne hurried to stay in step with me on the way back to our ship. “So that’s Harron Tavus. That’s really what he’s like. The arrogance, the trickery. The...access to considerable Imperial talent.”

I thought about spitting, but decided it wasn’t worth it. “I’ve had worse.”

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Tavus’s trail was cold, but clues were trickling in about the other Havoc defectors. We hit the ground on Tatooine ready to hunt, but our local contact didn’t have any leads to start with. We ended up riding out to check some of the farmsteads outside Anchorhead in the hopes of hearing some news of Imp activity. That’s

how we found one woman out fiddling with a hand scanner near one little homestead.

She stood rooted while we drove up. I took off my helmet and tucked it under my arm as I approached her. “Ma’am. I’m Lieutenant Savins, with the Republic Army. Can I ask a minute of your time?”

She shook her head at me. “We have to be inside by nightfall. Please go.”

A little kid, no more than eight years old, ran up to her side and gawked. “Wow, Mister! You’re done up like Havoc Squad!” He gestured at the spot on his shoulder where my insignia would be.

“That’s because we are Havoc Squad, kid.”

“Whoa—”

“Inside, Devy,” said the woman.

He scrunched up his face. “We got half an hour ‘til sundown, Mom.”

“Inside. Now. The Sand People don’t always wait until full dark these days.”

That got my attention. “Um. Sand People, ma’am?”

“Yes. Natives, savages. There’s a band that’s been raiding farmsteads all around here for weeks. You understand, I have to get my family to shelter now.”

“But they’re Havoc Squad, Mom! They’ve got a battle droid! I bet they could take the Sand People.”

That really depended on their numbers, how well supplied they were, what the terrain around here was like, whether we could find a spot to fight that didn’t give them comfortable sniper sights – and good luck with that, they know this country better’n we did – what kind of vehicular and droid support they had...

The kid was alternately staring at our uniforms and admiring M1-4X with big blue eyes. I like kids. There’s a light in their eyes that goes out somewhere on the way to growing up, and no one ever gets it back. I try to delay that moment as long as I can.

"I bet we could take those Sand People," I said. I looked around at Jorgan, Dorne, and M1-4X. "Optional assignment, guys, I know it's off hours. Anyone who stays, I figure we'll find a place nearby to lay up and watch, clear out anything that tries to hit the place."

"Such a gesture of goodwill toward the potential allies of the Republic is an excellent idea!" announced M1-4X.

"I'm in," grunted Jorgan.

I waited for Dorne's recitation of all the reasons it was irregular and therefore bad. "We're all in, sir," she said instead.

I hid my surprise as best I could. "That's what I like to hear." I looked to the woman. "Ma'am, if you don't mind me talking to your son." I knelt to meet the kid's eyes. "We're going to need a place to watch from, someplace we can view the whole perimeter of your house and where it'll be hard for anybody to sneak up on us from behind." Kids can think in those terms when they're horsing around; grownups don't always do so. So I asked the expert. "You're my scout here. Got any recommendations for me?"

Devy didn't hesitate more than two seconds; he scampered off in one direction and I followed, making sure to keep a pace his mother could keep up with. She still seemed on edge. I guess I would be, too.

The kid brought us to a sweet spot on a low rise with its back to the city. Good visibility, enough rocks for cover. "Here's where I would go if I were gonna shoot 'em. If I had the blasters," he said.

"You've got a real good eye, kid. And luckily we do have the blasters."

Devy surveyed the landscape and smiled a gap-toothed smile. "Can I watch?"

"No," his mother said quickly.

"I'm afraid you'd better stay inside and look after your mother," I told him. "It may sound boring, but making sure things stay safe and quiet on the inside's just as important as shooting the bad guys on the outside. Each of us doing what's



needed, that's what makes us a team." I nodded to his mother. "You'd best get him home, ma'am. If there's any trouble we'll clear it out from here."

We didn't have to wait long. The last sliver of Tatooine's second sun was still clinging to the horizon when thick shadows started scudding between the rocks a little ways around the complex. I heard one of M1-4X's missile turrets swinging into position beside me.

The action was surprisingly short; I don't know how Sand People usually fight but this was a small and poorly coordinated group. We cleared the field in minutes and immediately set about gathering the bodies to burn.

We had just gotten that under way when running steps came up behind us – too light and irregular for a fighter's. Devy ran up close to us and stopped short, staring at the slowly catching fire.

"Did you kill 'em all?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"Sure did. It's nothing pretty to look at, Devy. But I can tell you they won't be bothering you any more. You did good, showing us the right place to watch from so we could catch 'em."

"Jint and Leese are never gonna believe Havoc Squad got rid of the Sand People."

"Not gonna believe you, huh?" I took off my helmet and knelt to face Devy. "You can just show 'em this." I turned the helmet around and gently placed it on his head.

The second my hands were clear he yanked it off again and stared at it. "C-can I keep it?" he squeaked.

"Sure can. You helped Havoc Squad get the job done tonight. You earned it."

He ran back off toward the house, clutching the helmet tight. I stood up and nodded at his approaching mother. "We're in town a few days longer, ma'am. If any other trouble comes of this, call Anchorhead's mayor, he'll get you in touch with us."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

“Just doing my job. Good health to you and your son.”

With that the four of us started on back towards Anchorhead. I freed up a hand to run through my hair, letting the startlingly chill nighttime wind ruffle it further. It felt good.

“I like that part of my job,” I said to no one in particular.

“I’m not sure running yard maintenance for non-citizens in the back end of nowhere is part of our job, sir.”

I rounded on Jorgan, ready to tell him exactly what I thought of his grumbling, and found him looking at me with a gleam in those wicked yellow eyes.

I rearranged my attitude around that and returned his sly smile, then gestured on towards Anchorhead. “Let’s pack it in, people.”

## **10. Tatooine: Check in with Personnel; check in with personnel**

“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. It was secure in my memory as 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. “As a condition of my service in the Republic military, Personnel Division requires that I report regularly on my activities.”

So there was somebody else in the service who worried what kind of character had staggered through our door. I’d wondered.

“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.” Because if they weren’t she would probably disappear in a puff of bureaucratic logic. I could dream.

“Yes, sir. I’m just surprised the captain didn’t agree.”

“He questions you like that, he’s questioning Havoc Squad. That, I quote, 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.

---

Fighting was my life since I was old enough to carry a blaster. Seven, by my preference. Nine by participation. Eleven by when I got my own blaster.

Fighting was my life, and some days I still needed to close my eyes and figure out what the hell I was fighting against.

Stand still. Shoulders back. Deep breath. Hands still. Straight-up Imperial raid. Look over the site map. Three buildings. Civilian buildings. Fourth is Imp-occupied, fair game. Remember where you are. Tatooine, here, now. Your targets are in uniforms. Fire at the uniforms, not the accents. Three friendlies with you. Remember her voice. Friendly. Republic uniform. Don't shoot.

Remember where you are. Tatooine, here, now.

One more time. Here's the site. Civilians present. Fire at the Imp uniforms. You have three friend-

"Sir!" roared M1-4X. "All systems are at optimal power! I am fully prepared to bring freedom--"

"Blast it, Forex, do not interrupt me when I'm..." I swallowed hard. When I'm standing still doing nothing? "When I'm prepping for the job," I said harshly.

Jorgan stepped in. "Give him two minutes before any time we go into combat, all right, Forex? It makes him more effective."

"Of course, sir! Any technique you find effective is one more tool we have against the Empire!"

I nodded gratefully at Jorgan and turned back to face the map. *Deep breath. Hands still. Here's the site. Civilians present. Remember where you are. Tatooine, here, now. You know the Imp uniforms.*

Protect everything else.

---

Bombing in Anchorhead. It wasn't a big settlement; the explosion scene the mayor toured us around was a significant percentage of the total acreage. We left him in his office and went out for a messy work day. When we came back we were 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 that attack...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 them. 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 through a closing throat.

“Not every Imperial officer is a murderous psychopath,” nerfshit, “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.”

## **11. Tatooine: Fuse Overloaded**

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.

Fuse was on the line when we entered the mayor's office. He 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."

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"I could still help," I insisted.

I was nine years old, seated at table with Mama and Kirsk and Dakkan Isling and his son Rizz.

Mama shushed me. "Asking again won't change it, chief. Mister Isling's word goes in this."

"When you're older, Vierce." Mister Isling had a kindly look to him and a twinkle in his eye. I hated him at that moment. "Though if all goes well there won't be an occupation for you to fight when you're older."

“Sooner I can get in, more I can do to make that happen.” After that I glared down at my vegetables and stabbed them a bit.

Everybody else chattered while we finished up dinner. Well, Rizz didn’t, but Rizz never said much anyway.

The Islings got up to leave and Kirsk and I got up to help clear the table. Rizz caught my eye before he headed out and jerked his head to one side. I set aside the dishes and went to him.

“Meet me outside when you’re done, huh?” he muttered.

It was the most words I’d ever heard out of him in one stretch. “Sure,” I said, and got back to my chores.

The night wind gusted cool when I stepped out; we were coming on to autumn. The little garden out front was heavy with the last of the season’s vegetables...the ones I hadn’t sullenly chopped into little bits and swallowed at dinner, anyway. Rizz was lounging against the yard wall, almost invisible in the shadows cut from the streetlight beyond.

“What is it?” I asked.

Rizz mashed his smokestick out against the wall, then carelessly dropped the remains in the grass. “You want to help the resistance? There’s jobs a quiet kid can do. I can show you around some.”

“But your dad just said...”

Rizz shrugged. “You want in or not? There’s little things. Scouting mostly. Play it right, some of us cover for you, guys up top won’t catch you to stop you.”

“I want to fight.”

Rizz smiled thinly. I was still small then; he was fifteen, taller than most, long-faced, dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-mooded half the time. He dwarfed me both in body and in presence. “First things first. Can’t give you a blaster for keeps but I can teach you to shoot.” He cracked his knuckles. “Hand-to-hand stuff, too. It’ll come in useful when you’re bigger.”

“And you’d sneak around our parents to show me all that?”

“Sooner you can get in, more you can help. Had worlds of trouble getting my own foot in the door. I won’t make everybody else in this town wait.” He pushed off from the wall. “Down past the streamerball fields. After school.”

Then he walked off.

I felt around ‘til I found the smokestick butt and buried it so Mama wouldn’t find it. Then I went back inside feeling lighter than air. Rizz never did talk much, but it seemed that once he got started he opened whole worlds.

Over time I talked him into bringing in the rest of what became the Ridgeside core, our own tight-knit little group that all signed on at once the minute we were allowed to. Dep, Vrenda, Lydian, Eddy, Totten, Rizz, and me – Kirsks played coy around the edges, Illyris and Flash moved into town later – but Rizz was the oldest, the smartest, the center that kept us all where we needed to be. It wasn’t a nightmare, this memory. It was something to hold.

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Fifteen years later...

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.

Jorgan clenched his jaw so tight his cheek spasmed. He gave me one look of green-yellow fire, then walked by me and punched the door release. "Come on, Fuse," he said.

I swung around to face him. "Jorgan, that's a hell of a lot more trouble than you want with me."

"He surrendered, sir."

There was work to do and I couldn't let loose on Jorgan, nor by extension the idiot I would have to shoot through Jorgan to get to, just then. Dorne and 4X didn't seem about to speak up; if I was the only sane person there – well, I would have to sort it out later. I made myself start walking.

Fuse trotted to keep up. "Sir, I'll do everything I can. I want to make this up to you. To everyone."

I didn't look at him. "Two hundred forty-seven civilians dead from your testing in Anchorhead. A hundred and fifty of them women and children. Now I don't know what the fuck part of this surprised you when you signed on with those people and I don't care. Stay close, stay quiet, you might live long enough to see your court-martial. Jorgan, you're responsible for him."

## 12. Tatooine: The Traitor's Tale

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. I gestured for Dorne to deal with Fuse when we reached our own ship. I followed Jorgan straight up the ramp, across the holo room, and into the armory, and when he turned around I threw him a right cross that slammed him into the lockers hard enough to rebound.

He glowered at me and checked his jaw. "Feel better?" he said in a low hard voice.

"No. KIA was all he deserved. Don't ever cross me on something like that again."

"He doesn't need to die. You see a bad order, sir, you question it. Or you refuse it."

"What's bad about letting a traitor burn in the fire he helped set?"

"We wouldn't have nabbed Gorik without him. He's got intelligence on Havoc Squad's activities and he's more than willing to help. Mission says bring him in alive if possible. We can use him." Jorgan crossed his arms. "He's earned another shot at this."

I hefted my rifle. "I was just gonna give him the one shot, but sure. Two works." I lowered it again. "Either way it's my call."

Jorgan's stare never wavered. "So do it," he said quietly. "If you want it done, do it."

"I might." I fished a kolto press out of my pack and tossed it to him for his already-swelling jaw. My point was made. Then I left. I went, not to the brig, but to the bridge, where I could bring up the surveillance holo.

It's one thing to kill a man in combat or leave him to his fate in the thick of things. It's another thing, a much colder thing, to deal the execution in a moment of quiet. I've done both and seen both done as needed. Especially for traitors and collaborators. I've seen men – and women – die spitting defiance, I've seen them die laughing hysterically, I've seen them die chanting their articles of faith, I've seen them die crying and begging for their worthless traitor lives.

I figured Fuse would beg. He was young, after all. Stupid, stupid kid. Stupid, and others paid the price for it. I couldn't figure out a story that could stretch to explain both why he had turned on the Republic and why, when he knew it was already too late, he had helped us out.

He was just sitting there in his cell. He was done resisting. I guess he hadn't been resisting the whole time.

My stomach twisted a little.

Garza wanted him brought in alive and she wouldn't accept the story that he passed through Anchorhead just fine but somehow mysteriously died on the ship. That's what I told myself. From a practical standpoint I couldn't get away with giving Fuse what he deserved. That's all.

I cleaned up and then I went to sleep. Tomorrow I would return him to Coruscant. They can do firing squads just as easily there as here.

---

Jorgan was waiting for me when I got up the following morning.

"Was talking to Fuse," he said.

I didn't look at him. "I'll have to question your judgment on that, but whatever makes you happy."

"You know what got the old Havoc Squad to defect?"

"Indiscriminate malice?"

"No. Though maybe it wasn't much smarter than that. You remember Commander Tavus mentioned Ando Prime once or twice?"

"Yeah. There was some classified op there."

Jorgan nodded. "A classified op that went sour, and the Republic, rather than sending in support to get 'em home, cut 'em loose. They shouldn't have survived that, but Commander Tavus brought 'em out whole."

"What do you mean, Command cut them loose? Why would they do that?"

"Don't know the details, sir. I just know that's how it went down."

"And in response Tavus and the others decided to hop the fence."

"Looks like it."

"Idiots."

"Looks like it."

---

I banged into the brig a while later. Fuse was still just sitting there. He started and sat up straight while I settled on the bench opposite.

We looked at each other a while.

"Sir," he said weakly. "I'm sorry, sir."

"Your apologies aren't worth much," I said. I stared at him a while longer. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

Fuse leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. His hands waved and grasped at nothing while he spoke. "You have to understand. Havoc Squad served. We were the best. We could do the impossible, and did do it a few times. The Republic owed Commander Tavus and the rest of us more than I can count.

So maybe we weren't too popular with some politicians. It didn't matter. We did good.

"So when Ando Prime went down...when we found out support wasn't coming...it didn't make any sense. How could they throw us away like that? How could they just drop Havoc Squad? We gave the Republic everything. We would've done anything for them, for each other. And they cut us loose the second it was convenient. Can you blame Tavus for wanting out?"

"Out to the Empire?"

"Where else could we go? We're fighters. We just needed to be backed by someone who wouldn't turn on us."

"You knew what they were. You stupid son of a bitch, you knew!"

"The soldiers we'd met were dedicated, courageous – honorable, a lot of them. They believed in what they were fighting for, and the Empire believed in them." He shook his head. "I know what you think, sir, but not every Imperial is crazy evil."

"Oh? How many are, then? One in two, three, ten? All it takes is one when morons like you sign up to obey him."

"I didn't know, sir."

"Yeah. Well, I guess you found out."

"That's why I helped you back there. I wanted to try to set things right."

"Better two hundred fifty bodies late than never, huh?"

"If you think I don't feel terrible about that, you're wrong. I can't...I can't wash that out, I know that."

"If you're capable of feeling bad about it you're not much of an Imperial." I stood up. "So maybe I don't know what you are. I'll let Command sort that out." I headed to the door, stopped with one last thought. "I'm real sorry you didn't get your taxi ride home from Ando Prime. But next time you get pissed off at your bosses, don't take it out on the rest of us."

I headed back to my quarters. And, for some reason, took out my dress uniform. I just traced the embroidered insignia on it for a while. Back on Kegled II, we didn't leave each other. Ever. If anybody ever did...I mean, the people who got abandoned would survive. We're tough like that. I just don't know what they would do about it after.

The Empire, though? That move made Fuse and his friends worse than any abuse they could've taken here. I brought up my barebones mission report and added: "Only additional commentary on target's behavior is already on file as armorcam records from the day target and former Commander Tavus left Ord Mantell."

### 13. Interlude: Alternate Perspectives I

Elara finished off the application for replacement of one size 13 helmet and signed it. Most of the squad's operational documents could be handled without her commanding officer's notice, and he had made it very clear he preferred it that way. It did mean that Havoc Squad hummed along with her as an indispensable part. It would be nice to see that recognized, but she could live without recognition. She knew she was doing the right thing.

A soft knock came at the door. Unsure of who in this outfit would be doing anything softly, she touched her hair to ensure neatness and said, "Come in."

It was Lieutenant Savins, and he didn't. "Dorne," he said, brandishing a datapad. "Your, uh, E29H here. It lists nine nights spent on Nar Shaddaa. We were there for ten."

She had never seriously believed he would read the paperwork she submitted for his approval. But she was ready to defend every line. She had to be. "We were on direct military activity for nine work days, sir. The remainder was...well, between one thing and another," and that went for both of them, "personal. That goes on Extension 17, if for some reason we need to apply for compensation on it."

He frowned. "So they don't comp for that day. Do I owe you?"

Just because half that excursion had been bringing in his brother...well, the other half had been bringing in hers. On his command. His inexplicable command. "No, sir," she said warmly. "If anything--"

"Good," he said, and shut the door between them.

She wasn't sure what she had expected, after all. Kindness seemed to be his exception, only popping up often enough to keep her off balance. She filled in another form and put it aside without signing. Then she started drafting a letter to Aleksei. Wherever he was, it probably wasn't friendly. It was really impossible some days to know who was on your side.



---

“Jorgan,” said Lieutenant Savins, entering the mess with that large-scale saunter that said all was well. Fuse was offloaded to Coruscant. A dark cloud had left the ship with him, and Jorgan had a pretty good idea that justice would do justice’s thing now that Savins’ anger was at a safe distance.

“Savins,” he returned.

The big Human started rifling through the cupboard. He wasn’t trying to hide the scarred half of his face these days. It made maneuvering a lot less clumsy, and honestly, Jorgan wasn’t going to lavish pity on him for something he didn’t want to talk about. Savins picked a box. “Any word about the Deadeyes?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Okay. – It turns out there’s a form for taking time for personal projects mid-mission. Did you know that?”

Startled, Jorgan lowered his spoon. “Talking to Dorne?”

“Reading her paperwork. Comes out to the same thing, doesn’t it?” He scoffed. “So now I know what to sign when the time comes. You get the word, we roll out.”

“I know.” And he did. “Thank you, sir.” Jorgan set aside the remains of his breakfast. Nar Shaddaa had made it extremely clear that Vierce Savins looked after his own and managed to drag it to within the lines on the way. He’d seen one for that brother, one for Dorne, now one for him. “So, when does Forex get his one big favor?”

“Favors?” He looked genuinely baffled. “I’m just promising to shut you up the first chance I get. The only way I figure you actually will – by getting what you want.”

“You’re all the CO a soldier could want,” deadpanned Jorgan.

Savins’ mouth went hard and still in that way he had at odd moments. “I spent a long time forming opinions on COs before I got the reins,” he said, more or less humorously. “You just benefit.”

---

Kirsk wouldn't say that his big brother was better than him at everything, because he wasn't. He was terrible with women and with letting go of things. And with anger management. And he kept loaning Kirsk credits. That would all be paid back someday, but everybody agreed he was still an idiot to do it.

All right, so he was the shining commander of Havoc Squad. He was good at it, too. All do-goodery. And Kirsk knew he was taller, tougher, better-looking, at least prior to the incident involving a fit of angst and an Imperial explosives shipment. Maybe people trusted him more. Maybe he was the one who earned respect. Maybe he could do the tough-guy hard decisions.

But Kirsk could at least rest knowing that he was better at bumper ball.

The arcade downtown, and later the resistance base outside town too, had a rotating inventory of bumper ball machines. They would spend their whole allowances side by side, slamming buttons, then switching off. Vierce would always methodically study each one, playing over and over to map the tricks and rewards. Then Kirsk would step in and whip him. Hey, even before he got the cybernetics in, machines loved him.

Fast forward. Vierce called Kirsk out of the blue. And the first words out of his mouth were "Seven hundred and sixteen million on Mynock Patrol."

"Like hell," said Kirsk. Mynock Patrol was just about the hardest machine they ever had. It was dark, disorienting, with this voiceover in which comic-book caped crusader Mynock kept calling creepy cryptic crap. Vierce was terrible at it.

"I saved the high score," he said, waving a datacard.

"You sliced it."

"No, sir. You're the slicer. I earned this one."

"Where did you find another arcade with Mynock Patrol?"

"Little place off the Senate plaza on Coruscant."

"I'm going. And I'm blowing your initials off that high-score list."

He laughed a bit, then looked off holo. “Blast. I have to run, Kirsk.” Then, with one of his ultra-rare wide smiles, heavy on the smugness this time, “Just remember who beat you.”

The second he vanished Kirsk went for the bridge and changed course: to Coruscant.

Because if Vierce held the high score at bumper ball, Kirsk’s entire childhood was a lie.

#### **14. Alderaan: Paladins and Prodigals**

I’ve never lived with wealth. I’ve seen it from a distance; it always struck me as kind of breakable. Too much time and worry spent keeping it all shiny, time and worry that’d be better spent elsewhere.

Alderaan’s had a few thousand years’ head start on worrying about keeping its wealth shiny.

We took a taxi across what they call the Organa estate and I’m going to call Organa City. It’s big enough. The mission: Talk to a nobleman of House Thul, an Imperial ally, who had been captured by our friends the Organas. This Markus Thul claimed to have information about Gearbox, one of the last two Havoc Squad members still at large.

There were armed guards flanking the front door of Organa’s biggest building, but they took one look at our uniforms and waved us through. We hadn’t gotten halfway down the big entry hall when a plain-looking woman in livery charged up to us. “You there! Sir!”

The...servant?...trotted to keep pace with me. “Your presence is requested in the strategy room with Duke Charle Organa.”

“You’ve got the wrong guy. I’m here on Army business.”

“As your *host*,” the woman said weightily, “Duke Organa would be most pleased to see you at your earliest convenience for a discussion of importance to the mutual interest of Alderaan and the Republic.”

I hadn’t been on the ground long enough to know what kind of trouble it would be to ignore her. If nothing else I could explain the urgency of my mission to this Duke himself.

---

Organa’s briefing didn’t take all that long, and it was some comfort to see one of our own, General Kashim, in the room with him. On the one hand that meant Organa’s instructions held weight at a time when my priorities should be elsewhere; on the other, it meant that doing the stuff that would keep our ally from getting mad was definitely, officially sanctioned.

We got out. I led the squad up toward where I was supposed to meet the men for my actual job here. I stopped on the landing. “So,” I said, still mentally unpacking the speech and assignment we had just gotten. “Duke Organa.”

“Duke Organa,” agreed Jorgan.

“Officially appointing us, uh, paladins.”

“Remind me to add that to my resume,” said Jorgan.

“I will. Oddly enough, it’s already on mine.” Jorgan gave me a curious look, so I went on. “Girl back home used to say that my ‘gallivanting around righting wrongs’ made me a certifiable paladin.” Vrenda always did have a way with words. “Unlike Duke Organa she was making fun of me, but, the job description was there.”

“Can’t say I’m surprised, sir.”

“Yeah. Well, come on, then. There’s wrongs to right.”

---

There was a big meal that night in the state room Duke Organa had lent Havoc Squad. Somehow talk came around to life after the war.

Jorgan was nursing the same beer he had started the evening with. "Figure I'll settle down someplace with my girl," he was saying. "Thank the stars, now that she's seen Coruscant she isn't anxious to go back to Ord Mantell. So we'll go someplace nice. She can do her architect thing. I'll get, I don't know yet, some kind of job that lets me stay close to home. Change of pace, but I think I'll like it." He jerked his head my way. "What about you?"

"I'm staying in the service."

"Somehow I'm not surprised. Though you might think after, what, seventeen years fighting, you wouldn't want to try something a little more relaxing?"

"Fighting's all I've ever done. It suits me. Don't give me that look. Maybe after we've wiped out the Empire completely I'll retire, huh? Settle down on Dromund Kaas, find some beachfront property. They have beaches on Dromund Kaas?"

"Not sure. I've never been," Jorgan deadpanned.

"They have muddy patches between the usual rocks near some of the parasite-infested bodies of water, sir," reported Dorne. "I think 'beach' might be an overly generous term."

"Well, there goes that plan." I stretched and shrugged. "Army life it is."

"Heh," said Jorgan. "And you, Dorne?"

"I expect I'll continue to serve once the war is over. My skill set is suited to it."

"You two." The Cathar shook his head. "Havoc Squad is set for life."

---

"Mama! How are things?"

Mama's holo image smiled at me. "Well, going well. And you?"

"Keeping busy. I can't complain." That was just about literally true; any matter I could think of to complain about was classified to some degree now that I was in Havoc Squad. "How's your gentleman caller?"

Her smile developed dimples. Words can't express how glad I was to see that smile back when she started seeing Glend a year or so ago. How glad I still am to see it. He's just another West Ford City native, not a resistance guy or anything, but he seems solid enough. "Glend's doing very well," Mama continued. "The factory's doing better business every year. As for the shop, we had a water heater burst here a couple of weeks back, but nothing bad. Just enough to scare everyone and stain some shelves."

"You all right cleaning up? I can send some credits your way."

"You already send enough, Vierce. Between Glend and me we had enough on hand to clean things up just fine."

Now that was an odd thought. Even if Glend had been around for a while. "I suppose he's taking care of the house, too?"

"He's on to things that need fixing sometimes before they know they need it." She gave me a half-thoughtful, half-mischievous grin. "I'm sure I can save some chores for you to do the next time you're in town."

"Oh, don't let the house fall apart on my account." Mama always had a list of assorted repairs and brute-strength tasks she could use help with when I came by. It would be doubly odd to lose that. "But maybe save one or two things."

"I will. Now, then. Have you heard anything from Kirsk lately?"

"Afraid not. I've been busy with work; I was hoping he would be in touch with you."

"Not for months."

"Last I saw him in person was Nar Shaddaa." I skipped the parts about his ship being stolen and him being embroiled in what had looked like a titanic gang struggle. "He was doing great. Spoke to him briefly a couple of weeks ago. He's running guns for the resistance on Balmorra these days."

Mama sighed. "Just like his first paying job, hmm?"

“Same job landing the same kind of weapons to fire at the same kind of people. Balmorra’s better off for his doing it, even if I really, really hope they have some more work-oriented fighters to take the fight from there.” She still looked uneasy. “Don’t worry. Nobody’s ever going to catch a pilot as crazy as him.” Assuming he had his own ship back. Or assuming he knew his way around whatever ship he had begged, borrowed, or stolen since then. Anyway, Kirsk’s lurching, erratic flight style was incredibly hard to get a lock on. More than one Imp gunner had died trying. It was the closest to a direct kill he would willingly get.

“I’m sure he’ll be all right,” Mama said unconvincingly. “I’d rather he were all right closer to home doing something safer, but you know Kirsk.” She forced a smile. “He’ll get in touch when he’s ready. What about all this you’re doing? Are you still recruiting?”

That was about the most detail I had given her thus far. “Not actively. I’ve got the two sergeants and that prototype droid I talked about, we’re on an errand we’ve got to clear up before we go back to thinking about possible newcomers.”

“I see. Well, Sergeant Jorgan and Sergeant...who’s the other one?”

“Dorne,” I said shortly. I hadn’t told Mama anything but Dorne’s name. The less Mama knew about the local former Imperial, the better.

“Sergeant Jorgan and Sergeant Dorne will just have to step up.”

“They do, Mama. Havoc Squad doesn’t carry dead weight.”

“I’m glad.” She looked off camera. “Well, I need to be going. Call me if you get any news from Kirsk.”

“I will. Love you, Mama.”

“Love you, too, chief.” Her image winked out.

Dorne caught up with me after I headed out to the mess. She had some paperwork or other to ask me about. While we were talking it occurred to me to wonder where her brother Aleksei had ended up. He was all the family Dorne had on this side of the fence; it must’ve been a real relief once he defected to be allowed contact again.

And it's a comfort to know your people are all right. So yeah, I did wonder a little. But it wasn't my place to ask, not really. I didn't exactly have any place to start.

So I signed off on her completed form and got out of her way.

## **15. Alderaan: Thul Me Once, Shame On You**

The guy in charge of watching the Thul prisoner and our sole lead on Gearbox was Captain Cormac. He seemed a solid enough guy. He had no business saluting Lieutenant Me, but he seemed pretty impressed by Havoc Squad in the first place, so I returned it and then listened.

"We caught this guy sneaking in with a dozen Imperial spec forces, on their way to take out Duke Organa. He's the only survivor. Said something about Gearbox, Republic Spec Forces will want to know, and then he clammed up. We worked him over a dozen times, got nothing for it."

That didn't bode well, but then, if he was asking after Havoc Squad – and naming former Havoc Squad – I could hope he planned to talk. "Got it. Thank you." Cormac opened the forcefield to allow me into the little detention block and the first cell within.

The nobleman who stood there waiting was of average height and build, dark-haired and dark-eyed, covered in bruises and the kind of laceration that comes by accident from the overly enthusiastic application of bruises.

"Thul," I said. "You work for the Empire. Got yourself caught along with some real live Imp commandoes trying to get into the Republic's friend Duke Organa. And, they tell me, you expect the word Gearbox to be enough to keep you alive."

"So," he said, briefly trying to look down his nose at me then giving it up, "a visitor. Welcome, I am Markus Andarius Thul. Your aspect and equipment are not those of House Organa. Whom do you represent?"

"I'm with Republic Special Forces," I said sharply.



“Just as I had hoped. We have much to discuss. I can tell you all about Gearbox, the Empire and their activities. But before I help you, you must help me. I want protection for my wife and daughter.”

So not only was he welcoming me to his lordly jail cell, he thought this was a negotiation. He was certainly arrogant enough to be an honorary Imp. “A call sign alone doesn’t prove you know anything I care about. So talk.”

“My family,” he said evenly, “is back at the estate in Thul territory. If the Empire should find out that I have yielded information to the Republic there will be a reprisal. I want guarantees of their safety.”

“I want answers. I didn’t come here to make a trade with an assassin.”

“Then if you prefer, you can get nothing,” he said haughtily, and glared at me.

I got up close to lean over him, checking his face. It was bruised and cut up pretty good already, but he was still keeping up that nobleman’s composure. Might be the second wind you get when a new interrogator comes in, you can try to fake them afresh. Might be something else. Some people don’t break under beatings. Some won’t do it until way past when you’ve done something to yourself. Collaborator, I reminded myself. On a planet where picking a side hadn’t even been forced yet. He chose this.

I raised a hand to point without quite touching. “They missed a spot,” I observed. “Want me to fix that?”

“I’ll tell you nothing more until you assure the safety of my wife and daughter.”

I hit him, not quite hard enough to throw him off balance. A warmup tap. “I would tell you exactly how much concern I have for the safety of the Empire’s friends, but I don’t know any words short enough. You want to help them? Give me Gearbox.”

He braced himself. “Their safety first.” For all his frilly noble clothing, there was steel in his eyes.

I knew the script, I’d seen it enough, but I hadn’t had to get serious about interrogations since I’d joined up with the Republic. Oddly enough, I didn’t like

the idea now. I certainly didn't like the thought of doing it with Jorgan watching. He was the kind to get things done, but not...I looked at him.

He looked back at me, face set. He'd back me up. We had a job to do, after all, and he did care about that. He'd back me up, but I'd known him long enough to know that whatever face he put on, he didn't like it.

I cast a look Dorne's way while I was at it. She lifted her chin and quickly turned a little less green. "Sir, this is a direct violation of regulation 24 and a number of planetary treaties."

Like I didn't know it was bad behavior "Noted, sergeant," I said. Then I opened my mouth again, not quite sure whether I wanted to dismiss my people or just take Thul's deal. Objections from the rulebook I didn't mind, not when the mission called for something outside it. The problem was, the stakes were people and I wasn't sure those people – Thul's wife and daughter, that is – had had much of a choice. Alderaan's nobility, from what little I had seen, didn't strike me as having the most equal power. This guy, the assassin in front of me, he was scum, but...

Paladin. Right.

"All right, Markus. If it gets you to talk, I'll get you your family." I looked to my squad. "Forex, help Captain Cormac keep order here. I'll be back before long."

---

Let me make one thing clear. I believe in equality of the sexes. A dead comrade's just as dead no matter if it's a man or a woman who shot him. On the other hand, if weaponry and war aren't involved I'm inclined not to mistreat people weaker than I am. Which is just about everyone. The habit gets stronger the more delicate people get, that's all.

I followed Thul's directions to a mountain estate...everyone in these parts had a mountain estate...and, after making sure we didn't have any company, used the entry code he had given me to walk in a side door. I didn't know how much of the staff was friendly, so rather than announcing our presence I just started walking. Walking and listening.

Jorgan silently signaled at some point. We followed his lead down a side hall into a lavishly furnished little parlor where, inside the open door, two women, clearly mother and daughter, were seated.

Civilians, or at least they looked like it. In a comfortable civilian house, held by an Imperial ally. I never really thought of Imps as having civilians who weren't conquered and forcibly held. Civilians, I thought, and wondered whether there was really any such thing among Imps.

Both women stood and backed away from the door a bit when I entered. "Stay back," said the older woman in a commanding voice. "Who are you? What do you want from us?"

I signaled for Dorne and Jorgan to flank the door while I took a few steps in.

"Is this what real Organa soldiers look like, Mum?" said the younger woman, her voice soft and sweet. "How fierce!"

No weapons in sight. Habit of courtesy took over. "Ma'am. Miss." I nodded to each in turn. "I apologize for the abrupt entrance. My name's Lieutenant Savins. I'm here on behalf of your—" I settled on addressing the mother – "husband. He's currently in Republic custody; in the interest of keeping you safe from the Empire's notion of cleanup, I'm to escort you to him. Any questions?"

The older woman scowled. "You charge into our home, bristling with weaponry, and expect us to believe you mean no harm? What are you going to do to us?" For all her indignation, she let slip a hint of fear in that last question.

"I'm going to escort you to safety, to your husband. He said to bring the password 'Tyrovan'."

The anger vanished, replaced by a mix of relief and almost-tears. "The code word. Markus...he's still alive."

The younger woman leaned forward. "We have to go to him, mum."

Her mother shook her head sharply. "We have to think this through, Valyn. If we're spotted we'll be marked as enemies of both Thul and the Empire."

The best kind of enemies to have, in my opinion. “With respect, ma’am, I’m not making a request.” I gave her a moment to let that sink in. “We will get you out safe. Keep your faces hidden, you’ll be with your husband soon.”

“Don’t mope, mum,” said the younger woman, “this is going to be so exciting! Let’s go!”

‘Exciting’ wasn’t the word I would pick, but Miss Valyn Thul was downright thrilled with the relocation to House Organa. It was better than the other possible reactions, I guess.

She sat across from me in the little ground transport and she chattered. “Sneaking out in these disguises was so exciting!” she said, tugging at the unmarked hooded cloaks we had brought for them. “Just like in a story. Do you think anyone saw us?”

She paused, clearly expecting a response.

“Let’s hope not,” I said.

“But of course you would hope that, you’re the ones kidnapping us. Are we going to be prisoners?”

Effectively, yes. “You’ll have to stay in protective custody until things with your father are sorted out. You’ll be a lot safer with us than with the Imps.”

“If the Empire tries anything you’re going to hold us hostage, isn’t that so?”

“I hope it won’t come to that, miss.”

Her mother stirred. “Do remember yourself, Valyn,” she said. “These people are the enemy.”

I was sort of grateful for the effort to quiet the girl down. And sort of annoyed about the reasoning. “Your husband is helping us now, ma’am, it’s better if we’re all polite about it.” Blunt? Maybe, but with Valyn’s chattering I wasn’t in the best mood.

"You may be able to snatch two unarmed civilian women from their homes, but you will find that the rest of House Thul is not easily cowed," said the older woman. She kept on glaring at me. She was expecting a response, too.

Valyn jumped in instead. "But really, the Republic forces must be quite something, Mum. Just look what they sent to take us!" She turned to me. "The scars on your face. They're from a battle, aren't they? Was it here on Alderaan?"

"No, miss, it wasn't."

"Have you fought on many planets? The Republic must be putting their tricks on all sorts of worlds to try to take over."

"That's a skewed way of looking at it, miss."

"Of course. I suppose some people must call it a rescue. Isn't that exciting?"

I didn't give her an answer.

She looked around the transport's cabin, then back at me. "You know, you would be quite handsome if it weren't for your scars."

I didn't give her an answer.

"Did you get them fighting Imperials? You must have." She only paused a moment, which saved her the earful I was just about ready to give. "I suppose that's the dreadful thing about war. Won't it be nice to have things settled again?"

I was glad Jorgan was driving and the cab was noisy enough that he might not be hearing this. Dorne kept her eyes fixed on the floor. "Yes," I said. It'd be nice to have things settled with me far away from here. "It would."

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Finally we reached House Organa. Captain Cormac was called up, and never have I been gladder to hand off a problem. "Captain, can you work with the Organas to make arrangements for these two?"

"Absolutely, Lieutenant. If you want to talk to Thul, now's your chance."

“Got it.” I escorted the two women into the cell block.

They’d fixed up his face so he only looked a little bruised. That stark dignity showed through stronger than ever.

“Markus!” The older woman ran to hug him; Valyn wasn’t far behind. Thul wrapped his arms around both of them for a long moment. I couldn’t help but wonder why they hadn’t fixed his face the rest of the way. My dislike for Imperials was struggling against the dislike of anyone having to come home – or go out – to see their loved ones like that. Again, Imperial civilian involvement: kind of new.

“Altana,” Markus said from the middle of that ongoing hug. “Valyn. I’m sorry to have put you through all of this. Was your journey a safe one? Are you injured?”

Altana answered. “We are uninjured, husband. This beast you sent for us – “she pointed my way – “was more savage than those we encountered along the way.”

Gee, and I hadn’t even been trying.

“Don’t be such a crank, Mum,” bubbled the daughter. “This really was the most exciting adventure of our lives, Father – thank you!”

Her father gave her a look that was deeply affectionate under the bruises. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

He let them go then, and sobered, and turned to me. “You have carried out your end of the agreement. With Altana and Valyn safe, I can tell you everything you wish to know.”

The relief on Altana’s face vanished. “Markus!”

Our house is no longer ours, dear. It is a puppet, and nothing more. The two of you are my only concern now.”

Just then Captain Cormac got back with someone to escort the Thul women away. So Markus sat down with Havoc Squad to talk.

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Thul did cooperate after that. He knew Gearbox was involved in deployment and testing of some series of artillery emplacements, even if I had to do a hefty amount of footwork to even begin locating them.

So I got back from a day of that and was a little surprised to find a small slight nobleman glaring daggers at Captain Cormac.

“Problem?” I said as I approached.

“No, sir,” said Cormac. “I was just explaining to our host here that Havoc Squad has been involved in several critical engagements winning victories for House Organa, and being very helpful about it.”

“I see,” I lied. At least he was making us sound good?

“Ahem.” The nobleman tried to stare down his nose at me. He had to lean pretty far back to do it. “Allow me to extend the fondest gratitude of our noble House of Organa for your heroic assistance, Lieutenant. I am Pallos Thessius Organa, first nephew to his highness, the great duke of Organa. It is an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Quite the declaration. “Lieutenant Savins. It’s good to meet you, too, sir.”

“Uh, yes. Well, indeed.” He looked like he had some indignation left over and wasn’t sure what to do with it. “I am told that you have spent some time in the company of a prisoner, detained herein. One Markus Thul. The man is of no small consequence to our house, as you may well be aware. What is your interest in him?”

“Unfortunately I can’t discuss those details, sir.”

He scowled. “Surely you’re joking. Lieutenant, I’m certain you would agree that my family has a right to know what transpires in our home. Markus Thul is telling you secrets, which I deeply suspect he would not do without promise of recompense.”

“With apologies, I can’t go into detail with uncleared personnel. Any uncleared personnel.”

He went for a different tack. “Your mistrust saddens me. Are we not allies? Can we not confide in one another?”

I looked at him.

Pallos kept on scowling. “Well, I’m afraid the house business compels me elsewhere, so I must take my leave of you, Lieutenant. But let me make something clear: Markus Thul attempted to murder the head of our house. He will not be pardoned for his crime.”

Fine by me. The only real concern about giving the Organas a shot at him was whether they would pull out what he knew about Gearbox and, by extension, Havoc Squad’s defection. Would he hand them that from despair or spite once I gave him over?

It didn’t matter. The Organas deserved a shot at him. “He’s not cutting a deal that takes him out of your hands,” I told Pallos. “That’s a promise.”

“Ah. Yes, well.” Again, the extra indignation seemed to leak away. “Very good, then. Carry on, Lieutenant.”

And carry on I would. Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

## 16. Alderaan: Stars

We had supper with Captain Cormac’s people. They were all right. I spent the evening out alone on some paths running from House Organa’s controlled grounds into the mountain woods. There’s fresh air to be had on the planet, you just have to get upwind of all the nobles to find it.

Sergeant Dorne almost ran into me when I returned to the ship. She was on her way out with a lamp in one hand and her holo in the other.

She brought herself up short before impact. “Sir! There you are!”

“Uh, yeah,” I said. “I was just out for some air. What’s wrong?”



"You weren't responding on holo."

"You were calling?" I took out my holo. It looked ordinary. No missed messages, no nothing.

"Repeatedly, sir. I've never known you to fail to respond."

"No, it's just the holo was cutting out. No need to worry." Unless there was something wrong on her side. I gestured for us both to get back inside and started walking. "Was there a problem?"

"You're usually in by this hour, sir." A cloud passed over her face and she hurried on. "I was going to ask you to sign off on some paperwork."

I thought of the red sunset and the stars already out. "Paperwork? At this hour?"

"With the demands of the Organa defense we've fallen behind, sir."

"Nobody's asking you to put this stuff together on the night shift."

She brought me up to the table by the holo and pointed out a datapad. "I just need you to sign these, sir. The rest I'll have ready by morning...in addition to the Form ER-171 for a new holo."

I reached for the pad; she snatched her hand away to let me take it. "You let me finish this," I said. "That requisition stack, too, I'll be signing 'em anyway so it isn't much trouble to fill the rest."

"If you're sure..." She was looking at those requisitions like they were a prize garden plot I was about to ruin.

"Go on," I said. She really did need to get some concept of relaxation. "Go for a walk or something. It's gorgeous out there." As anyone with half a brain would realize. "You ever see the night sky from a Core World?"

She looked from the datapads to me, a curious gleam of green. "No, sir. Coruscant's night sky isn't visible in all the glare even if you do reach the surface of the city. I think the closest I've come was Taris."

“Yeah, I remember Taris had some good stars. Just about what my old home had. But Alderaan, here, we’re practically in the middle of the galaxy and despite the locals haven’t managed to completely carpet ground light. It’s amazing out there. Take a look.” I tipped my head toward the door. “Beats slaving over paperwork any day.”

With that I tuned her out and got to work. Nice to have something practical to come back to after the endless blast of hot air that was Alderaanian nobility.

I finished the forms. Something made me stay out in the holo room anyway. A person wasn’t meant to take in that kind of beauty alone. That’s all. I flipped through the paperwork, telling myself I was proofreading. A long, long time later, Dorne came back.

“Sir,” she said softly.

“Not too bad, right?”

She smiled. I mean really smiled, like submitting her own star for consideration in the evening. “That was magnificent,” she said. “I never knew a peaceful night could be so brilliant.”

I didn’t pass judgment on the night or the smile, though both were clear on the insides of my eyelids. I nodded. Then, intelligently, I retreated to go sleep.

## **17. Alderaan: Gearbox and a Good Night’s Sleep**

Gearbox was sealed a bunker in the mountains, beyond even the mighty Duke Organa’s reach. That just meant Havoc had to make our own path. M1-4X cheerfully applied explosives to the bunker door while the rest of us laid down cover fire. Soon enough we had our path in.

But the big room at the center didn’t have Gearbox. It just had a big holo. And on the holo, a man in enough armor to make me think he was actually kind of scared of something.

“Well, hey there, kid,” he said, gesturing expansively. “Been a while now, I barely even recognized you. And who’s that nice young lady you’ve got with you, there? I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.”

Great. He wanted to make small talk. “Back off, Gearbox.”

“Listen to me, young lady – never go around with a man who won’t introduce you. Means you aren’t important to him.”

Dorne didn’t turn a hair. “The lieutenant simply knows that I have no interest in conversing with traitors to the Republic,” she said coolly.

“Well, honey,” and it scraped my nerves, “judging by your accent and the company you’re keeping, I’d say that’s something of a double standard.”

Traitor to the Empire. Did the second part make the first one a good thing? This wasn’t the time. In that moment she was the damned most important thing in the world. Because I’d rather eat a grenade than give him the satisfaction of winning against her. For some reason.

“Havoc has one standard,” I growled. “You failed it.”

Gearbox brushed it off. “And is that...Jorman? Gorban? Something like that, right? Well, you must have been pretty desperate to drag that worthless pile all the way from Ord Mantell.”

“Sergeant Jorgan dragged himself,” I growled. “Havoc Squad. You may have heard of the outfit.”

“Oh, pardon me, Sergeant, sir! Officer on deck! An officer with a lower rank than I remember...hm.”

Jorgan looked ready to spit nails. “I’m going to feel bad taking you down, Gearbox. It’s like gunning down...well, like gunning down anything old and decrepit. Not really sporting.”

“What’re you going to do, shoot my hologram? That’d really show me.”

“Well,” I said, “you could fight, or you could talk us to death.” Was he ten meters away? Ten light-years? I would’ve dearly loved to know.

“Nothing like that, Lieutenant. Welcome to my humble little research bunker. Have you had a pleasant stay so far?”

“I dunno, the voiceover has been lackluster.”

“Listen to your elders, kid. You never know when you’ll be gone. I’ve got to hand it to you – I didn’t think anybody could breach this place, but here you are. Still you aren’t real Havoc Squad material. See, a real Havoc trooper would never have strolled right into a trap like this one.”

That’s when the bay door burst open. That’s when the walker stormed in.

“Forex,” I yelled, and started firing at anything that looked like a sensor. Son of a bitch would be blind before he died. I’m told that experience is scary.

To his credit, he burst out firing when the walker keeled over. It gave the four of us a solid chance to confirm the kill.

“You okay?” I said to Jorgan.

The Cathar scoffed. “If I were bothered by every moron who thought his bark was as good as his bite, I wouldn’t be in this line of work.”

“Good.” That silence seemed lopsided. “Uh...Dorne?”

“Nothing I haven’t heard before, sir.” Crisp as ever, but I thought it sounded different this time. “Let’s go report.”

“Good idea.” I was ready to be done with this planet.

---

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 said, “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.

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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.” Her lips thinned. “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 strain 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.”

## **18. Interlude: We Are Havoc Now**

Tavus’s entire problem was that he felt the Republic didn’t respect its warriors. The Republic had left him stranded on Ando Prime after a mission gone wrong. And did he respond by seeking justice? Did he respond by publicizing or quitting? No. He responded by handing himself and his squad over to the Empire.

For that there was no justice.

Tavus was in command of an Imperial ship. Great, I would have a trophy after he was dead. The squad boarded and fought their way in in a fury of sparks and blaster bolts. For once I didn’t have to control myself. Everything here was the enemy.

Kardan on Coruscant. Wraith on this ship. Gearbox on Alderaan. Needles on Taris. Fuse on Tatooine. We were collecting them one by one. Now we only had one left.

We cleared the bridge except for the man standing at the front viewport. I raised my arm for silence. He turned around, and it turns out I was just as angry then as I'd been when he turned his back on me to go offer a weapon to the Empire.

He didn't look surprised, or scared, or much of anything. "Lieutenant," he said. He'd kept his Republic accent. "It seems that no matter how hard I try I can't have any kind of gathering without you. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. You were a member of Havoc, just like the rest of us. I suppose you belong here, in some twisted way."

"I am a member of Havoc Squad, Tavus. You're a traitor."

His pale eyes narrowed. "I am Havoc Squad, Lieutenant. Kardan, me, Wraith, Gearbox, Needles and Fuse – we were Havoc Squad. You are nothing. You should be thanking me, really. I imagine that killing all my comrades...my closest friends, has been good for your career."

"You think I did that for my career?" I shot his arm and hit. His blaster clattered away. He stood dead still. "I don't forget. Your comrade Needles injected rakghoul serums into his own men to watch them twist into monsters." I left my blaster behind – sidearms in close combat were a terrible idea – and closed the distance. He dropped to a wary crouch but I had reach and strength on him and it barely took effort to pull him into a tight headlock. I yelled in his ear. "Your comrade Fuse built bombs to test out on civilian villages. Your comrade Gearbox built an assault walker to use on the civilians of a planet that wasn't even part of the Republic! Those are your heroes! Those are your friends! And those died, just like you're about to."

"Savins!" barked Jorgan.

What I could see of Tavus's face was dark purple. I let him drop. He hit the floor with a sick thud. I crouched beside him. "The Empire doesn't respect its warriors," I said. "It respects its monsters. That's the only reason it welcomed you."

He looked up at me. He snarled. I grabbed his wrist so he wouldn't get any ideas.

And that's when she talked. "Sir," said Dorne. "He's clearly defeated. We should return him to Coruscant for debriefing and court-martial." She made it sound like a glorious idea.

I could see the bastard's pulse racing in his neck. More than anything I wanted it stilled "Dorne, have I ever asked your opinion on how to treat an arms-bearing traitor to the Republic?"

I felt her eyes on me and knew for a fact they weren't wavering. "No, sir. But you're getting it."

I growled a second to give myself time to think. I didn't want to kill this man with my bare hands while she watched. Much. "Jorgan," I snapped. "Thoughts."

"Well, I wouldn't shed any tears if he were killed in action," said the Cathar. "But if you've got him in hand...a court martial would help put closure to that last chapter of Havoc history. For good."

I twisted Tavus's arm until he whimpered, then let go. I was intensely aware of my blaster where I'd left it before closing, and his blaster where it had fallen. He was nursing his arm now. He might change his mind.

"Well, Tavus," I said. "You can go down fighting. Or you can come with me to Coruscant. Your court-martial will be quick, and decisive, and classified top secret. It'll be the same people you blame for leaving you on Ando Prime. Nothing new will get publicized. Nothing will be reformed. Nothing will be changed. And at the end you will die, unmarked and unmourned. Which I, for one, could cope with." I picked up my blaster, then his, leaving him kneeling warily on the floor. "So pick a fight or come along quietly. Either way it's the last choice you'll ever make." I flicked a release on his blaster and handed it to him. It would cost him a second, and I could still say he was armed when I shot him. "You know what I want to see."

Tavus met my eyes. Then he flicked the release right back, pivoted, and fired at Jorgan.

"Bastard!" I shoulder-slammed him as hard as I could, sending him sprawling. He kept his grip on his blaster. I fired.

He slithered to a wide right-angle pipe and showed his teeth at me. "You understand protecting them."

"I will never understand you." Something occurred to me, something that gave me a good feeling. "Forex. Show him what we do to traitors."

Jorgan and Dorne looked away. I didn't.

---

I made my full report to Garza and for once she was happy about it. I think Dorne reported my final sleight of hand but it didn't matter if Garza was the one reading the report. She would understand.

So old Havoc Squad was gone, all but one stupid kid who might yet make good. It was out of my hands.

When was the next time I would get to take down an Imperial? All right, so maybe I was rushing ahead. I was supposed to go home first. Yet another place we had cleaned out. At least there was that.

I had been away from home too many times over the years. At last I had something to show for it.

## **19. Interlude: Downtime with Old Friends**

I touched down in Coruscant Military District B Spaceport, Docking Bay 32, and grabbed my bag. The plan was a few days here with old friends in the service who couldn't make it back to Kegled II at the moment; after that I would go on home.

To my surprise...and, I'll admit, in light of my crew debarking right then, slight discomfort...the friends I had called to get together with had skipped the rendezvous point and come to the hangar. I was greeted straight off the ramp by an armful of strawberry-blonde energy who set about kissing me in her signature shameless style.

When she let me up for air I took her waist and gently set her down on the ground. "Why yes, Eddy, I am single at the moment, thank you for checking before—"

She hopped up and kissed my cheek again. That's Eddy. "We'll have fun," she cooed, and bounced away.

Jorgan was making a peculiar strangled sound that I will not try to describe. He managed close to a straight face when I turned to him. "We'll just head out, sir," he said.

I looked to Dorne and realized that dealing with her in front of a gaggle of Kegled resistance veterans would be a disaster. They'd tear her to pieces. I turned just enough to hide the Imperial hand signal for silence from my friends - Republic one would've required a hand already in their view. She nodded and kept her mouth shut. I nodded back as apologetically as I could and then looked back to Jorgan. "See you in two weeks."

The two of them went on their way. I approached the waiting gang. I hugged willowy Vrenda, nodded at saturnine Rizz, gave clasped hand/one-shoulder hug things to Dep and Flash.

I stepped back and took a second to look Flash over. He was nearly my height, lanky, red-haired and hawk-nosed. Part of his nose was now covered in a smooth black metallic shell, one that extended over one eye and across to his ear and some of his scalp. Set into that gleaming surface, a red cybernetic eye moved opposite his natural brown one.

"So which cyborg jokes haven't you heard yet?" I asked him.

"Heard 'em all before I even got out of the medcenter. Don't worry, you can recycle. Tell you one thing, though? I thought you were lucky they had the supplies to save your eye in the old blast. Nuh-uh, not anymore. You have got to try one of these things." He pointed at the artificial eye. "That way they coulda saved the kolto for keeping the rest of your face pretty."

"f I got any prettier the ladies wouldn't let me get any work done." That was mostly funny for being a complete lie. "So, where do we start?"

"You could start by telling me about Sergeant Gorgeous there," said black-haired Dep, nodding after where Dorne had gone.

Ah, Dep's priorities. "Not a chance," I said. "Way, way off-limits."

"Don't tell me you converted to the school of not looking at the women in your cell. She's just your type."

Flash caught the look on my face, even if he misguessed the reason for it. "Stars, Dep," he said, "do you even think before words come out of your mouth?"

Dep shrugged. "Not seeing the problem. What are the odds lightning strikes twice?"

And kills a comrade-turned-girlfriend, assuming I were stupid enough to set myself up for that again? I scowled at him. "That depends on how much time you spend dressing up in bronzium and dancing on skyscrapers during thunderstorms, doesn't it? End of speculation." They didn't need to know that any surface parallels between Dorne and...well, anybody...were the least of my problems with her. For now I just wanted to relax. "You can still ask inappropriate questions about Jorgan, though."

"Hmph. I bet he doesn't even leave furballs," said Eddy. "The Cathar in our squad doesn't leave furballs. That was a huge disappointment."

Flash gave her a crooked grin. "Think of the poor cleaning droid, Eddy. I bet he's grateful."

"Oh," said Eddy. "Do not start. The C2-N2 model we have? I don't want him grateful. I would synthesize hairballs to drop all over the ship if I thought it would make him sad."

"You know what this conversation needs?" interjected Dep. "Drinks. Come on, Classic Shots."

We had gone there all the time while stationed at the base nearby; it was my traditional role to make some kind of complaint against the joint. "Could you possibly pick a bigger dive?"

“Dive’s the point. Reminds me of Ye Olde Bomb Shelter back home.”

“Don’t pretend it doesn’t,” Vrenda told me in her husky voice.

“The resemblance might be there,” I conceded. “A little. But the girls you meet at the Classic aren’t nearly as good-looking.”

Vrenda nodded, accepting that tribute. “I’m glad the exalted commander of Havoc Squad still knows his place.”

“You know me. I don’t forget.” I set an arm around Eddy’s shoulders and grinned down at her. “Let’s go then.”

The transport went fast, the six of us hanging together on the public shuttle and only breaking up to file into our old standby Classic Shots. We crowded into a booth – you couldn’t trust the long tables in that place, they would fall over if you so much as looked at them funny – and settled in for a long evening. I had an end seat, the advantage of being too big to fit anyplace else. Eddy squeezed up to me on the other side. We ordered, we drank, we talked about where everyone had been.

I couldn’t say a whole lot, since everything Havoc Squad does is automatically classified. It was good just catching up with everyone. But, of course, the question did come around to me eventually.

“Figures you can’t talk,” Flash was saying. “You know, Havoc Squad doesn’t get half the press coverage it used to.”

“Yeah, Command’s gotten away from that.” For all the reasons Fuse and the other traitors had said once. It wouldn’t do to have warmongering heroes getting publicity.

“I figured that was you coming on board and telling every reporter you saw to buzz off and find something useful to do,” Eddy said sweetly.

“Nah, Command told ‘em to buzz off for me. Means I can’t really talk about any of it, though. Good work, but it gets tough sometimes.”



Rizz and Vrenda exchanged looks. They're just about the least nurturing parents in the galaxy, but they still think they're parents. Luckily they didn't decide to push anything. Instead the conversation moved on. Somewhere in the second round of drinks that the traditional Ridgeside toast came up.

"To absent friends," said Rizz, raising his mug.

"To absent friends," we all said.

"To Lydian," added Eddy.

"And Illyris," said I. We clinked glasses all around and drank deep.

It's good to have the old gang back together.

---

"Sir," said Jorgan, which was practically a formal introduction out of him. "Got a lead on the Deadeyes."

I was on the shuttle out of Coruscant, but that could change. "Time and place, I'll be there."

"Nar Shaddaa. Looks like Balkar came through."

"Good for him. Changing tickets now."

"Tell me where you're stopping. I've got the ship."

"That works, too."

On Nar Shaddaa we returned to the glitzy cantina where Balkar held court in a back room. He was alone when we got there.

He was Human, handsome as these things go, totally leisurely-looking – you'd think he didn't know what life and death meant. "You're early!" he said genially. "Haven't even had time to order us a round. So, how's that 4X unit treating you? Racking up plenty of kills, I hope."

"The Deadeyes," said Jorgan. "Balkar, what do you know?"

“Right,” he said, eyeing me and Jorgan both with something like philosophic resignation. “I dug up what info I could, and frankly, there isn’t much to report. Far as I can tell, the Deadeyes tried to off some Imperial big shot. Things went south, and they got themselves captured.”

“I know that,” said Jorgan. “So what are we doing to get them back?”

A viewer without audio would never know Balkar had bad news on the way.

“Unfortunately, nothing. We’re on the verge of an incident. The Imperials are out for blood, so the Republic is distancing itself from the operation. I shouldn’t even be talking to you about all this. Those boys are on their own.”

Jorgan looked to me. “These are Republic soldiers, sir. Good men, all of them.”

“Look,” said Balkar. “I know this stinks. My hands are tied on this one. I would tell you to investigate that makeshift prison the Imperials recently set up in Shadow Town, but I’ve got major players breathing down my neck.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Don’t mention it. You’d have be pretty tall to breathe down mine.”

Balkar laughed, again, something for the camera. “Savins, I respect your enthusiasm, but...be careful. If casual conversation ever got you to be careful.”

“I get it, Balkar. Maybe sometime soon I take you up on that drink.”

“Havoc’s own Vierce Savins, slowing down. Never thought I’d see the day.” He grinned and made a vaguely dismissive gesture. “Try to have a good time, guys.”

Jorgan and I walked out, and I ignored the beep of my holo. I had a pretty good idea what kind of local area map Balkar might be sending me, and I appreciated it. Well, mostly.

I pitched my voice low. “It took Balkar six months to tell you your men were on the same planet he’s on? What do we pay the SIS for?”

“Liquor, apparently. Are we going?”

I palmed my holo. “Yeah.”

The run was almost sadly uneventful. It wasn't even my usual crunch and charge; Jorgan cleared the way with his sniper rifle and we got an actual gate code to get in the normal way. All we found was a holorecord saying the Deadeyes had been transferred offworld. And coordinates. Encrypted coordinates.

"My brother could..." I said.

"Heh. Balkar first. Let's keep this in house as much as we can."

But voices were raised when we reached the lounge again. A voice, some sour guy yelling about Imperial diplomats.

"I just went out for a drink at Hari's," Balkar said calmly. "They've got a new waitress there. A real looker."

"You're not funny, Balkar. That little stunt your friends pulled ruined any chance we had of negotiating the Deadeyes' safe return."

Jorgan opened his mouth. I raised a hand for silence. I didn't even dare look around the corner. Listening would have to do.

"I don't know why you decided to send Havoc Squad in, guns blazing, but it makes a senior agent's life worse. A lot worse. So forget about continuing this little line of inquiry."

"It would help a lot if I knew what you were talking about. Last I heard Havoc was on Alderaan taking in the sights. Now, unless there's something else?"

I gestured to Jorgan. We got out of there.

"I don't want him taking more heat for this," I said. I covered ground while we talked. "He did do his best."

"Someone's got to figure those coordinates," said Jorgan.

"Kirsk. Believe me, if anyone can get it it'll be him. When we see him."

I sent an encrypted message to Balkar later. "Sorry about drinks. Who's your friend?"

“Not your problem,” came the reply. “Senior Agent Zane calls? We haven’t talked in months.”

## 20. Interlude: Drinks with Jaxo; Dinner at Home

The call reached me in an open park swarmed with as much sun as could dodge the skyscrapers. Ava Jaxo showed up looking pleased. “Lieutenant,” she purred.

“Captain,” I corrected. Not that I like to brag in certain situations. “How’ve you been?”

“Getting better by the minute. Listen, I’ve got a transfer coming up between jobs. I don’t suppose you’re anywhere between Balmorra and Nar Shaddaa on the galactic map?

“Sure,” I lied. “Are you out that way?”

“I will be in a day and a half.” She laughed. “Let’s find us a transfer station. Timeline’s a little tight. Just drinks this time, farmboy.”

I rolled my eyes. “If I were a farmboy I would be taking this precious downtime to go nerf-tipping.”

“Mm, I rate above nerfs.” Her eyes took their time. “It’s a start.”

Balmorra was a war zone, but there was a planet a sector over that was comfortably Republic. I took a commercial shuttle and left Jorgan in charge of the ship. I went through every shirt I owned, that is, a series of Republic-issue fatigues and dress uniform, and ended up in a plain white T-shirt and cargo pants. Probably not the most seductive look, but I wasn’t prepared for anything else.

Boy. She was.

It was casual: heels, pleasantly molded, pants, tight-fitting, shirt, sleek with a low neck. I did succeed in continuing that survey without too long a pause. By the time I reached her face she was beaming. “Hello, Captain,” she said. “Buy me a drink?”

“Anything she wants,” I said to the droid.

“Way to put me on the spot,” she said. “Total defeat for the Empire?”

“I’m sorry. I do not understand ‘total defeat for the Empire.’ My repertoire includes two hundred thousand beverages. Please make another request.”

“Partial defeat?” said Ava. “Oh, forget it. Telos twist.”

“One for me, too,” I said. “Do you think they can really make two hundred thousand drinks out of the stuff under that counter?”

“Never argue with a bragging droid. They’ll just stubborn you to death.”

“I never owned a talking droid growing up.” The vacuum didn’t count.

“Farmboy. You get used to ‘em. Or you scrap ‘em, there’s kind of no middle ground. – Hey, let’s invent a Total Defeat for the Empire.”

“What?”

“We can invent a better drink. So he knows two hundred thousand and one. What do you want to start with?”

And that’s just how she chattered. Two hours wasn’t nearly long enough. I didn’t freeze up once. That told me something about her, something that was very valuable to know.

Her holo beeped. “There’s my cue,” she said. “Off to bigger and secreter things.”

“Ava.” I stood up and covered her hand with mine. “Be careful.”

“Vierce.” She stroked my palm with her thumb, a tiny trapped and very distracting sensation. “Faint heart never won fair Captain.”

I touched her hair. It was dark, longer than strictly regulation when it was down. And soft. I was thinking this and a few other things when she pushed up to kiss me. Even in the screaming self-consciousness of being in public it felt good. I kissed her back, hard, and she took it with a shiver, only to break away and

whisper. "Not on the first date, not on the second...don't keep me waiting forever, Captain."

"I don't think that'll be a problem." I watched her go. I couldn't help it.

---

My heart lifted to see West Ford City drifting up toward our shuttle. After the excitement of the mess that was the Tavus chase, it was good to come home.

I rented a speeder at the spaceport and headed straight home. Mama's house had been at the outskirts of town once; the burst of development after the occupation ended had caused the city to close in around her, but she kept her little low house and its garden just as they've always been.

Mama greeted me at the door with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome home, Captain."

"Ha. Good to see you, Mama." I stepped in and looked around at the old place, neat, nothing flashy, every furnishing chosen to last. "Where's your gentleman caller?"

Mama smiled. With dimples. "He's keeping the shop open tonight. He'll be around to see you tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

When I reached the dining room I found Kirsik brazenly sampling the cookies on the sideboard. "Hey there," he said. "Heard something about your schedule, thought I'd swing by."

"Still alive, huh? And taking dessert early. Nice to see you. Insult any Hutts lately?"

"Nah, that got old. Besides which I can't really show my face in Hutt space to insult any more of them right now."

"So nothing's changed. Great."

We chattered, Kirsk offering some highly sanitized accounts of his adventures, while Mama finished prepping dinner. And then, once we all sat down, Kirsk just had to start in on me.

“So Vierce. How are the kids? How’s the dynamic defector duo?”

Mama’s eyes widened in a cross of amusement and curiosity. “The who?”

“Big brother’s squadmate here, Sergeant Dorne. She and her brother are Imps, came into the service just recently.”

“Kirsk!” I looked down and fiddled with my napkin. “Sorry, Mama.”

“Sorry? For what?”

For that thing I didn’t mean to admit to anybody on this planet? “I wasn’t going to bring her up. She’s former Imperial, like Kirsk said, but I can’t exactly get rid of her.”

“She’s a nice girl,” said Kirsk. “Stiffer’n starched support beams, but she’s all right.”

“I don’t doubt she is,” said Mama. “She must be very good to be in Havoc Squad.”

“Yeah,” I said gruffly.

Mama looked at me while I was busy not looking at her. “Did you expect me to be angry, Vierce?” she said gently.

“That I’m working side by side with an Imp? Yes.” I made the effort to make eye contact again. “Yes, I expect everyone here to hate that.” Easy to say she wasn’t all bad when I was out working with her, but here on the old grounds...here it was something different.

“Chief...I’m getting older,” said Mama. She tucked her greying forelock behind some of the still-mostly-brown hair further back. Then she smiled. “Not much older, but older. And I’m finding that I don’t have much hate left to give. I save it for the people who earn it individually. Besides, if she’s serving with you she can’t be all bad.”

“My CO didn’t give me a choice.”

“Vierce. No authority on this planet or any other has ever stopped you from righting what you saw as a wrong. If she’s with you, it’s because she earned your permission.”

“You’ve never tried to argue with General Garza.” I poked unhappily at my vegetables for a few moments. “She’s good,” I said reluctantly. “I’m just not proud of letting one of them in.”

Mama looked at me thoughtfully for a long time. Finally she said “Can I tell you something?”

“Sure,” I said.

“During the occupation you spent most of your time away from the normal parts of the city. The normal parts of life. Lots of people came though my shop, lots of them were regulars. Our people and Imperials both. And the Imperials weren’t all hateful maniacs. Most of them just wanted some kaff and maybe a smokestick. Your work, it was right. It was necessary. But it kept you in contact with the angriest and the worst of them. You fought it back. But I promise you, the rest of us weren’t living in terror absolutely every day.” She patted my hand. “Except on your behalf. I believe some Imperials aren’t all bad, and I believe anyone both sensible and brave enough to come to our side should be congratulated.”

She might have a point. I just wasn’t sure how many others around here would see it that way. “I guess we’ll see,” I said.

“Progress,” said Kirska. “Don’t worry, Mama, we’ll drive some sense into him yet.”

After that the conversation finally went over to the city, the shop, home things, news of Totten and the other locals. I always remember life going slow here...tough at times, yes, but slow...but I’d been away long enough that things had still had a chance to happen.

We finished our meals and Mama cleared the table, waving me away when I tried to help. Benefits of being a guest, I guess. After that she excused herself to sleep.



The moment she was out of the room Kirsk turned to me and leaned in, his shoulders hunched up tense. "So," he said. "Glend."

"Uh," I said. That would be the man who had been seeing Mama for the last year or so, not that Kirsk and I had been around much to talk to him. "Glend?"

"We grill him tomorrow. Agreed? We need to figure out what his deal is. I scoured his records again. He looks completely clean."

"Maybe he is clean. An upstanding citizen who happens to like our very likeable mother."

"He's up to something! He's probably in it to steal the shop. You know how much work she's put into it."

"He's not going to steal anything."

"You don't know that." Kirsk chewed his lip for a few seconds, something I haven't seen him do in years. "I don't trust him."

"You make no sense, Kirsk."

"What?"

"Just over dinner you said you're fine with forgiving the Imperial who's shot at our friends, but now you can't trust a perfectly nice man giving Mama some comfort?"

"I don't trust him suckering her into a relationship."

"She deserves some happiness. After all she's been through, to finally have something of life go on? It's good."

"Now you're making no sense."

"What?"

"You're the king of brooding over past grievances. But when it comes to Mama you're the lead cheerleader for getting over it?"

“What good would it do having her sit alone?”

“You tell me, big brother. Since you’re so keen on life going on, when’s the last time you went to see a girl?”

I gave him a warning look. “Had a perfectly nice dinner out on the Core three days ago.”

“Eddy doesn’t count.”

“It wasn’t Eddy.”

Kirsk raised his eyebrows. “Oh?” he said, his voice dripping disbelief. “Met someone, did you? Name, rank, and serial number, or I’ll know you’re just making it up.”

“Ava Jaxo, Sergeant, four nine six seven something. Smartass.”

“You couldn’t even be bothered to make up your imaginary date’s entire serial number. That’s just sad, brother.”

“You want to tell me you’re doing better? Meet any nice girls lately?”

“Loads. Scads. It’s great.”

“All right. How many of those girls would sooner slap you than kiss you at the moment?”

Kirsk got shifty-eyed. “That’s a very different question. Also unfair.”

“Could you call someone right now who wouldn’t immediately give you an earful?”

“This has nothing to do with anything, Vierce.”

“Uh-huh.” I did love seeing him scowl. “Don’t fret. If you’ve really run yourself out of options, I could set you up with this former Imperial you seem to be really sweet on.”

“Stars, no thanks. It’d be too much like dating you.”

“Now what is that supposed to mean?”

“Overly serious. Overly—” he dramatically placed a hand over his heart – “Duty Bound. She even talks like you.”

“Uh. No.”

“Uh, yeah. Remember when we were all together on Nar Shaddaa? What was that job you were doing just before I came on board?”

“Kirsk, that’s sensitive information. You know I’m not authorized to answer.”

He leaned back looking smug. “See? You talk just like her.”

“No, I – that was cheap!”

“Cheap is a specialty of mine. Anyway, you never answered earlier: How is the good sergeant doing?”

“She’s alive.”

“Nice, real nice. And her brother?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“Ah. I thought maybe you talked to your own crew sometimes. Or at least kept some kind of tabs on Aleksei. He seemed like a nice enough guy when we brought him in.”

“I didn’t really notice.”

Kirsk rolled his eyes. “Okay, moving on. How about the guy on your ship you can stand?”

“Forex?” I said stubbornly.

“Ouch. Have a fight with Jorgan or something?”

“No, far from it. We’re good. He’s good. Actually the reason I was delayed coming here was helping him out with some stuff.”

“Oh? What was that?”

“That’s sensitive information.” I may have stuck out my tongue at him. A little bit.

Kirsk rolled his eyes again. “Brother, I’ve been from one end of this galaxy to the other, I’ve seen a lot of amazing stuff, but you remain the most colossal prig I have ever met.”

“Yeah, yeah. So, bumper ball?” I jerked my head in the general direction of the downtown arcade.

His grin lit up the room. “You’re on.”

---End of Part 1---

## **Part II**

### **21. Kegled II: (Back in) the Saddle**

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I was stretched out on my stomach, letting my feet kick idly while I switched between reading the textbook on my datapad and staring out across the river. It was a nice day.

“Vierce!”

I rolled and twisted just enough to see Illyris bounding up the hill towards me, that fine white-gold hair streaming behind her. She was dressed as a nerf wrangler, complete with lasso, baggy chaps, and one of those brilliantly colored neckerchiefs they only sell in tourist shops nowadays. She was also carrying a big colorful bag.

“Vierce, you haven’t even started getting ready for the Carnivale party!”

“I wasn’t planning on going.” I would’ve gotten up, but she flopped down beside me, then wrapped an arm around me and gave me a quick spark of a kiss.

“You should,” she told me. “I can’t be a nerf wrangler without a nerf.”

“I’m not going to be a nerf.”

She grabbed a handful of the brown hair that flopped over my unscarred face.

“Already halfway there.”

“Am not! If you want me to cut it, you could just say so.”

“Please come?”

I freed up a hand to play with her hair. “I would love to.”

She perked up.

“Without a costume.”

She pouted.

“*But*, this,” I nodded down at the datapad, “it’s killing me. I have to clear this lesson by the end of the week.”

“Says who?”

“Says me.” I’d been delaying this chapter for weeks; things kept coming up that needed handling. Turns out it’s tough to keep any kind of school schedule when you’re too much wanted by the Imps to attend school as such; since I’d finished regular levels with a tutor last year, the university-grade stuff was all me. Me and whatever time I had.

Illyris made a face. “Your demands on your students are unreasonable, professor. If I were you I would complain.”

“You don’t even have to be me. You’re you and you’re complaining.”

"I'll stop if you promise to come."

"I'm learning here. You should be happy."

"Put it off 'til tomorrow. Then you could learn by helping me study." She was in the real university, after all.

"That doesn't work."

"No," she giggled, "but it's fun."

"Not listening." I stuck out my tongue at her, then kissed her, then ignored her.

She tensed up and pounced on me, straddling my back while she did something or other. I continued ignoring her. When you have a brother like Kirsik, you get to be an expert in ignoring up-close annoyances.

But then she started doing things that felt suspiciously like pinning stuff.

"Lyr?"

Illyris giggled and kept going.

"Lyr. Lyr, what are you doing. Illyris? Whatever you just did, undo it." I struggled on for another textbook sentence or two before I felt her wriggling down to continue her nefarious scheme. "I'm not being a nerf for Carnivale."

"You'll be the handsomest nerf there," she said without stopping.

"I'm not a nerf!"

"Come oooooonnnnn."

"If I go will you get rid of whatever costume you just pinned to me?"

She leaned low over me and to one side so I could see her glaring. "Do you even understand how holidays work?"

"They work," I grumbled, "by me loving you enough to abandon my responsibilities and go do stupid things."

She squealed. “Yes!”

She scrambled aside to let me up; I stood and dusted myself off. I pulled a couple of long shaggy fake-fur strips and a cloth saddle off my back, as well. “I’m going, but I won’t be a nerf.”

We took the usual route downtown; the streets were packed with colorfully costumed people in varying states of drunkenness, and we avoided patrols. Illyris kept a tight grip on my hand the whole way. I counted myself lucky she wasn’t using the lasso.

It was a good time. It always was with that crowd, the Ridgeside core and a number of other young adults who had since come to the area. Everyone seemed really delighted to see us. We were in good spirits. And as always, Illyris with her sparkling laughter was the brightest of all.

Late in the evening Kirsik swung by, his new cybernetic implant nearly lost in a mass of flexiplast war-droid accessories. “Hey, nerf-boy!” he called happily. “Nice tail!”

Everyone in earshot seemed to quiet down a little bit.

I checked.

I had a tail.

Illyris’s face was a round freckled study in mischief.

I tugged the cloth nerf tail off and brandished it as threateningly as one can brandish a cloth nerf tail. “Dammit, woman. I am going to feed you to your stupid nerfs. As soon as I find some.”

“Ha. I know how to deal with them.” She danced around and swung herself up onto my back, her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist. “To the drinks table! Giddyup!” she giggled.

I sighed loudly, but I giddyup’d. A man’s got to know when he’s beaten.

~~~~~

Seven years later...

The weeks of leave flew by. Good to see the gang on Coruscant, good to see the rest of the old guard back home. 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.

---

We were still on Coruscant. Garza was there. She was not removing Dorne from the squad. I didn’t mind that all that much. We were doing okay, I figured. “The time has come for you to choose an executive officer.”

“Jorgan,” I said. Was that even a question?

## **22. Balmorra: The Gun Runners**

Balmorra was a bloodbath. And as a professional shedder of Imperial blood I can tell you, that was a mess. We were led by the nose through a scheme I completely lacked the context to understand by the explosives specialist we had been sent to recruit, and every passing day and holo conversation made me angrier.

It was a bunker near the hotly contested Balmorran Arms Factory when my holo finally said it was nearing the location of our newest recruit: Tanno Vik. The place wasn’t guarded but we had had to clear two Imperial patrols on the road in.

I heard the voice two seconds before I rounded the corner into the warehouse proper. "I didn't bring this this far to sell it to some offworld schmuck," said Kirsk. His brown hair was slicked back, his jacket had the battered look of the fashionably used, and he was scowling fit to raze. "We're saving it for the resistance."

The bulky Weequay named Vik raised a hand, palm out, warding. "I buy from you. You go away. That's how this works."

I cleared my throat. "Seriously?"

Vik and Kirsk both looked my way. They pointed at each other. "You know this guy?" It was hard to tell who sounded more outraged.

"Specialist Tanno Vik. Meet my brother. Kirsk, this is Tanno Vik. He's taking orders from me."

Kirsk recovered first. "Great! Because I have a shipment bound for the resistance by way of unofficial Republic channels."

"What!" said Vik. "You were about to agree to-"

"No, I wasn't. You were fantasizing that I was about to agree to selling it to the highest bidder."

"Captain, sir, he's reneging on a deal."

"Vik. You just made Havoc Squad jump through flaming hoops for six days straight. Do I look like I care about your financial problems?" Jorgan might've snorted. Very professionally.

"What's Havoc Squad's brother doing running guns for some backwater resistance?" grumbled Vik.

"What's Havoc Squad's specialist doing trying to redirect those to offworld price gougers?" countered Kirsk.

"I'm just a hardworking man trying to make ends meet," said Vik.

"That's nice," I said. "This going to the resistance."

Vik scowled and tossed his first, and for a long time only, salute. "Yes, sir."

---

We went back to the Bugtown cantina. Vik seemed to be getting over his annoyance. Dorne and M1-4X went outside to do something to the giant bugs out there. Something fatal, I assumed, but I wasn't going to get close enough to check. I left Jorgan briefing Vik and went to the bar to talk to Kirsk.

Kirsk was tapping a tall glass against the cybernetics in his cheek, opening and closing his jaw to affect the pitch of the resulting impact. "So," I said. "Vik."

Kirsk didn't smile. "Watch that guy. He's bad news. Or completely morally neutral, I'm not sure which."

"Could be both."

"Could be both." Kirsk looked me over. "You look like hell."

"I've been corresponding with Vik for a week."

"That's all?"

"What? Yeah. That's all."

"So you and Miss Dorne are square?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

"Brother, you put meaning in silences like no one I've ever known. Come on. You realize you're still just skipping over her every time you look over a scene?"

"So what?"

"I think it's time you admitted that she's a good person."

"And how the hell can you know that?"

“Because an iffy person would’ve made sure you were fired by now. She wants to help the Republic more than she wants to slap you. I’d say that’s pretty saintly.” He paused. “She hasn’t slapped you, has she?”

“No! You don’t even know that I’ve...”

“Don’t I? Let me guess: The cold shoulder? Asking for advice everywhere but her? Paying attention exactly as much as it takes to criticize? Do you think I don’t know what you freezing someone out looks like? Knock it off.”

I was about ready to tear my hair out and it was his fault. “Why does this matter to you?”

“I also know what you with an open wound looks like. And it’s not pretty, not to mention it’s incredibly annoying for the rest of us. You probably sprinkle salt in it every morning and tell yourself it’s her doing it. I’m here to tell you, you can let it close already. You don’t get manliness points for toughing it out.” He smirked. “Besides, I suspect she could-”

“You.” The voice reverberated from the door. “You’re under arrest.”

“What?” we said.

The man walking in had a uniform and badge. “You. Scavenger. You’re the one who stole the contents of that ship crash outside Sobrik.”

“He wasn’t using it,” protested Kirsik.

I gaped, and was serious about it. “You’re robbing the dead?”

“I was getting it into the resistance’s hands! As soon as I get it out of impoundment.”

I turned to the officer. “You’re not going to shoot him, are you?”

He raised his eyebrows. “What? No. We were going put him away until he pays a fine.”

“Great. Carry on.”

“Vierce!”

“It’s an old saying. You stab my back, I stab yours.”

“That’s not a saying!”

“Please, take him away.” I can’t say I minded watching him go. Served him right for prodding me. He’d be fine. He always was.

### 23. Balmorra: The History of the Moff, i

I was ready to talk to her, all right? Finally clear the air. Kirsks was right, for once, and it was about time I welcomed her to the squad. I hadn’t been ready on Taris. I don’t think anyone could blame me.

I finished up some gaming on the console in my quarters and found M1-4X, Jorgan, and Dorne in the holo room. They were relaxing after the day’s mission, getting along fine.

And then before they noticed me I actually heard what Dorne was saying in the laughing voice that suggested she thought she was telling a funny story.

“I was assigned alongside this captain under a nightmare by the name of Moff Brannick, who – “

My head spun. I stepped in and cut her off. “Brannick? You worked for Moff Brannick?”

The room went still. She seemed to shrink a little when I advanced on her. I got just close enough to counter anything she might try, because that’s the instinct that kicked in. “Yes, sir,” she said tensely.

My throat was tight and scratchy. “When you said you’d heard of Kegled II. Did you serve there? Under him?”

“No, sir.”

“Good.” I backed off a step. “Never say his name. Never talk about what he’s done. Never, ever tell me what you did under him. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

By the time my vision cleared I was already in the corner of the cargo hold with the punching bag. I did a bare-minimum handwrap and got going, trying not to think. Thoughts came anyway. Jab, jab, right hook. Moff Brannick had presided over three years of terror with a smiling hands-on touch. Jab, left hook, over and over. Lin Deggins, matronly, tough as nails, innocent of the charges they hung on her. Jab, jab, right hook. Senelyana Potts, plain in features, absolutely beautiful in motion. Jab, left hook. Eddan Reysel, the rangy sniper and killer chef. Jab, jab, right hook. The lucky ones died in the field rather than going back to Brannick’s prisons. Jab, left hook. I don’t forget.

At some point Jorgan came in. “You knew him.”

“He was military governor of Kegled II from when I was fourteen to when I was sixteen.” Jab, jab, hard hook. Enough to break bones, if only the old would-be masters were there to hit. “He was a monster and he liked it.”

“She didn’t—”

“He looked for people who were also monsters and liked it. One day serving under that man is one day more than I can forgive.”

Silence. I knew he was still standing there.

I swung a few more times. Hard. Then I stopped, rested my head against the bag. “Jorgan, I can’t do this anymore. I’ve tried. I know, I know she’s earned her place in Havoc Squad but I can’t be her commander.” Without really meaning to, I slid down to my knees. I was too tired to do anything else. I was furious. I was exhausted. “I don’t know what else to do. I should apply for a transfer.”

“Sir, you can’t. We’re in the middle of something critical, there’s too much riding on the mission for you to back out now.”

“Me snapping under fire will wreck the mission anyway.”

Jorgan spoke in a low hard serious voice. “You’ve been doing fine, Savins. Just back off, sleep on it, and we know not to talk about it any more.”

“You don’t know. You will never know.” My voice was tearing itself to shreds. “It’s not – it isn’t – maybe she somehow walked through it all clean, but that past, the places, the names, the orders, they’re all there and *she didn’t stop him.*”

“There was no way she could have.”

“Dammit, I know that. It doesn’t help. Maybe I know she’s been all right with us – “ I pointed to my head – “but I don’t know it.” I pointed to my gut. “Just...” I didn’t want to cry in front of Jorgan. “Just get out of here.”

I passed through the ship much later on the way to my quarters. I heard her banging around in medbay, arranging supplies or whatever. Being who she was, whatever that meant. I hid in my room, wrapped up my bleeding hands with supplies from the first-aid kit there, and quickly prepped something on the console to submit to HQ. The minute that was done I went to sleep.

The nightmares went on and on.

---

The form was simple, so simple I could figure it out without Dorne. One request for transfer, right then and there. It was stupid, but what the hell else could I do? I couldn’t be near her and I couldn’t sabotage her career just because I didn’t like her. I submitted the request and then lay down knowing it was going to be a rough night.

The holocall woke me up mid-yell. Just another nightmare. I coughed a little, pulled on a halfway presentable shirt, and rubbed my neck in a doomed attempt to ease the tension there while I answered.

“Captain Savins, what is this?” snapped General Garza.

“General, sir. That’s a request to transfer out of Havoc Squad, sir.”

“Why are you wasting my time with this joke?”



“It isn’t a joke, sir. Lieutenant Jorgan is perfectly qualified to step up to command. I think my skills would best be used elsewhere.”

“If you’re doing this to complain about Sergeant Dorne again...”

“It’s not a complaint, sir. But I can’t perform under fire when she’s around. That’s a reflection on me, not her. I’ll be better off next to someone who doesn’t have an Imperial background.”

“Stop being ridiculous. I will not tolerate you discarding the mission over a personal preference.”

“This isn’t a preference! I don’t know what’s going to happen if...if something happens at the wrong time.”

“If you require psychological assistance for your situation it will be arranged, but you’re not going anywhere.”

“‘Psychological assistance’ won’t save my people in the field.”

“No. You will. Now you have work to do, Captain, and I expect to see results. That’s all there is to it.” The holo winked out.

I stood there for a second letting my vision blur. Garza wasn’t going to let me out. I was seriously expected to willpower my way through this. The only decent fair way out was getting closed for no good reason.

I went back to bed. The nightmares might be easier to face than the alternative.

## **24. Balmorra: The History of the Moff ii**

I split Dorne off with M1-4X for the day’s operations. I pushed hard through the mission, found other things to do, pushed hard through them, too. Jorgan kept up every step of the way. Finally we turned homeward.

“Jorgan,” I said. “Don’t come after me. Keep her away from me. Tell Forex and Vik, too. If something comes up, you have the command.” I went right to my

quarters. I wasn't hungry, and there was no point washing up when I knew I wouldn't feel clean anyway.

I sat on the edge of the bed, buried my face in my hands, and tried not to think.

When the door opened I knew it was her. She stepped in and let it fall shut. There were two things running in my head just then, like there had been ever since the first time I told myself I had to treat her with some minimum of respect. Part of me felt horrible about doing this to someone who had earned her place here. Part of me wanted to snap her Imperial neck.

"Everyone on this ship had orders to keep you away," I said.

"Sir, you're needed. Permission to speak?"

"Denied, Sergeant."

"Our mission is urgent and we can't continue like this. No outside mediation can arrive or act fast enough. This has to be resolved here."

"Or you could just keep talking. This may be the first time I've ever seen you disobey orders."

"When the matter is important enough, I'm left with no choice." I heard her shifting a little. "I've done it before."

As in defecting. I looked up at her. She was giving me this defiant stare. "Well then," I said. "What do you have to say?"

"I served under Moff Brannick," she said steadily. "He was a monster. He did a great deal of damage himself, but he also liked to order other people to do...just, cruelty for cruelty's sake."

"I know all that," I said roughly.

"I know it, too. I made an effort to report his crimes, but those reports were ignored. Everyone said he was too powerful; what they meant was, nobody more powerful than him cared. It was one of his cronies that started closing in on me, questioning my dedication to the Empire because of my objections. It was the knowledge that sometime soon I would be directly ordered to act against my

conscience that finally drove me to defect.” She looked away. “I already know what would have been asked. I won’t talk about it.”

“Suits me. You never tell me about that. I never tell you what he did to my people. Shutting up is what makes this work.” I kept leaning my arms on my knees and I hung my head to cover my face again. “Stars. I’m sorry, Dorne. I can’t do it. I’ve tried, but I can’t. Just knowing you were around them, talking to them. My chest’s about to explode. I don’t know what to do anymore apart from putting in for a transfer, and that just got denied.”

“Denied?” she said. She sounded...well, upset. “Captain, if anyone were to transfer out of the situation, I would expect—”

“There’s enough people out there who would wreck your career for who you are. I won’t be one of them. I can’t do much but I can offer that. Jorgan could step up here and he’d do right by you, but that avenue’s been closed off.”

Things were quiet for a few moments.

“Dorne?” I said.

“Yes, sir?”

“Why haven’t you filed a complaint against me yet?”

There was a long pause. She must have considered it. Was she just afraid to make waves?

“We were doing well, sir,” she said slowly.

“I was being slightly less of a bastard.”

“We get the job done, sir. Havoc Squad has been succeeding in all of its objectives. Besides which you have always made an effort to keep your feelings from contaminating your decisions.”

My laugh came out as a bitter bark. “If you’re going to take up lying you should practice with smaller ones first.”

"You've made the effort," she insisted. "You arranged my brother's safe passage on Nar Shaddaa. You took the early steps to handle Personnel Division's doubts about my assignment when you could easily have let me hang. Those aren't the actions of an abusive authority. Matters are sometimes difficult, yes. But when it comes down to it you treat me with the same fairness I've seen you extend to others. That...that means quite a lot."

I looked up at her. When I was looking at her I couldn't hate her. "You risk your neck out there. You've earned better. If I were any kind of leader I would just deal with...knowing. You do good work. I respect you. It isn't fair of me to ask you to erase twenty-something years of your life just because I can't handle it." I blinked hard. "I hate that I can't handle it."

"Sir," she said, after a while. "Do you believe I'm on your side?"

Imperial, I thought. Like I just heard. Decorated in their service. She had been in the room with Moff Brannick, saluted him, taken his orders.

She had also fought shoulder to shoulder with me. She had done so well here.

They'd valued her there, too.

I shook myself back to looking at her face. She was still waiting for an answer. She looked hurt. Not the wounded but steady firmness she usually took on when someone gave her grief. This was different. Plain, open hurt, getting worse every second. "Yes," I told her. "Everything I've ever seen of you backs that up. You're with us now."

She nodded. A second later she said "You're aware that I trained at the officers' academy on Dromund Kaas. I qualified for medical specialization in my final studies there. As soon as I had completed that I was assigned to the front lines. At any given time the Empire is embroiled in a thousand conflicts on a hundred worlds. This was the defense of our home, the duty every citizen was called to."

I stayed quiet. If I opened my mouth I would only end up doing something stupid.

"There was no choice in serving; it's compulsory for every able-bodied citizen of Dromund Kaas. So I trained. And I served. I thought it was war to be waged as civilized people wage it. So far as we knew the cause was right; the Republic was

composed of genocidal hypocrites, their establishments corrupt, their influence utterly destructive. So we were told.” She pushed a few strands of hair that had come loose back behind her ear and then met my eye. “It is difficult to get an accurate idea of how the other side does things when all you see of the other side is the blaster fire.”

I creaked like a hinge that didn’t want to open. “Why are you telling me this?”

”Because, sir. I have never known you to do the wrong thing once you’ve been confronted with the truth.” Her gaze was perfectly steady and I couldn’t manage to look away from it. “That’s one of the reasons I stay. If what troubles you is what you’re forced to guess about my past it’s better that I disclose what did happen.”

”I...” I had to cough a little to clear a sudden thickness in my throat. “I see.”

”Despite all I had been told about the Republic, I was forced to wonder whether it would be better than a system in which unquestioned obedience to leaders such as Moff Brannick was both expected and enforced. I expect that my very presence here tells you what I ultimately decided on.”

I nodded.

”Most of the Imperials I knew weren’t bad people. But the system was open to abuse. When stepping out of line invited a quick death at best, one corrupt person in charge of drawing the line could do a great deal of damage. As Brannick did. And as others did. That’s why I left and that’s why I fight for our side now.”

I wished I could think faster, sort through the mess of confusion and hurt and disgust and, well, this feeling that I’d been thoroughly humbled. It was a lot to process. Too much, but I had to try for her sake if not for my own.

It finally occurred to me that she, standing in front of me, couldn’t possibly know which way I would jump on this. She’d laid it all out anyway. Even though she shouldn’t have had to defend her existence in the first place. Yes, she was what she was. But more importantly, she was what she had become.

”Dorne,” I said slowly, “you are one hell of a human being.”

"I only do what my responsibilities call for, sir." There was almost a shy tinge to it, but not a bad one. It was a relief and then some to hear her sounding something other than miserable.

"This was above and beyond and you know it. You shouldn't have had to come explain anything, but...thanks. You've got to be the bravest person I ever met." I smiled a little in spite of myself. "The defection was pretty gutsy, too."

She returned the smile outright. Then she saluted. "I hope this helps, sir."

"It already did." I stood to return the salute. Stars knew she'd earned it. "Good night, Sergeant."

---

Jorgan was standing at a poor simulacrum of ease around the corner. He was pretending to read a datapad. His other hand loosely held a riot stick.

Sergeant Dorne rounded the corner and raised an eyebrow. "Sergeant, when I finally prevailed upon you to let me pass, I didn't mean for you to post a guard."

Jorgan set the datapad aside and gave her a wary yellow look. "He's gone off before." He raised an illustrative hand to his jaw.

"He'll do the right thing if you just show him the truth."

"I know," said Jorgan. "But sometimes the truth doesn't move as fast as his fist."

"He wouldn't." She frowned. "If you were worried enough to prepare to incapacitate him, I should think you would have reported him by now."

"I didn't think I would have to. He's decent most of the time, he gets the job done, and before today you were never crazy enough to go after him when he gets like this. Besides, even if I did try to take him off duty. Garza never seemed open to changing the arrangement."

Dorne looked back at Vierce's door. "No. She wasn't."

He took a moment to digest that statement. Then: "Are we good to work tomorrow?"

“Yes.”

“Him too?”

“Him too. In fact, I think things may improve a great deal.”

Jorgan looked curiously at Dorne, then over towards Vierce’s quarters. “All right then,” he said, and padded away.

## 25. Balmorra: So This is Awkward

There weren’t nightmares after that. Huh.

In the morning I spent as much time in the refresher as I dared, mostly just staring at the mirror trying to figure out what to do when I got out there. Rush in, guns blazing? Well, that’d be in character. Guns blazing at *what* had become a little foggy.

She greeted me in the mess with a few quiet words and I answered in kind. At least she was friendly. Good. I hadn’t completely wrecked things. Jorgan was mostly quiet, too. He just watched us both.

Fine. I could use the time to sort things out, anyway. Even if I didn’t have words for a thought process there was still a lot moving in the back of my head. The three of us just set about prepping our separate breakfasts. I kept my mouth shut, in part to let things process, in part on the principle that if I didn’t say anything I couldn’t make anything worse.

M1-4X was waiting for us in the briefing room after. Vik sauntered in late. Not much for me to say; we had all been together for every effort and briefing so far on this planet. “All right. We’re going straight to the Balmorran Arms Factory today to help the locals crack their production line. We ready to go?”

As always M1-4X was the first to answer. “I am always ready to further the cause of democracy in the galaxy, sir!”

“Then let’s do that.”

I hung behind, though, in the holo room, after Jorgan, Vik, and M1-4X left the ship. Dorne loitered for a few seconds in the briefing room. Maybe she was expecting the place to be empty when she did get to the holo room; she stopped short when she saw me.

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*

Mama wrenched at my ear as she dragged me into the living room, where young Kirsk at the far corner of the couch was sulking.

“Now,” prompted Mama. “You owe Kirsk an apology.”

*

“Sergeant Dorne?” I didn’t want to do this, but by all rules of decency I owed it to her. I gestured back toward the briefing room. “Can we talk?”

“Yes, sir,” she said with that briskness that, I had come to realize, covered a serious apprehension. It didn’t do much to put me at ease, but I guess my ease wasn’t the point.

*

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, and tried to wriggle away.

*

Now or never. “I owe you an apology.”

*

Mama’s grip held firm. “Sorry for what?”

“Sorry I broke your speeder,” I said. Kirsk watched me with unfriendly eyes. I rolled my shoulders and wished I was elsewhere.

*

Dorne started. "That's not necessary, sir."

I shook my head. "No, it is. This has been going on long enough."

*

Mama wouldn't give up. "That was his favorite toy, wasn't it? It was important to him."

"I know," I whined. Mama glared down at me. "Sorry, Kirsk. I know you really liked it."

*

"I haven't been fair to you, ever since you came on board. You've been nothing but good for this outfit and I've done nothing but try to chase you out." I took a deep breath. Was it warm in here? "I was out of line, and I'm sorry."

*

"Now. Why did it happen, and will you let it happen again?"

"I got mad," I said. "I won't do it again."

*

Dorne stayed quiet. Well, stars knew there was more for me to say. I rubbed at the hopeless knots at the back of my neck. "I passed judgment too fast, and without really looking. You belong here on your own merits. I won't forget that."

*

"There," said Mama. "Kirsk, what do you have to say?"

Kirsk uncurled from the couch and glared at me. "You're still a big jerk," he said, and ran off.

*

I held my breath.

*

"Now, then," said Mama, finally letting go of my ear. "He'll calm down. You just remember, it's no good getting into fights, especially not with your own friends."

*

~~~~~

Dorne looked up at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. She was looking *at* me, not just in the unhappy necessity of my direction, and I never knew the difference until that moment. "Apology accepted, sir." I couldn't place the tone of her voice. I hoped it was good.

"We good to go, then?" I croaked.

She nodded smartly. "Lead the way."

Sooner or later my ears would stop burning. For now there was nothing to do but keep going, and hope that the pain would lead to better things.

---

Remorse. Vierce Savins was a fierce man who held passionate grudges and viewed half the population of the galaxy as targets. Yet he was capable of remorse.

The Captain wasn't giving her a chance because he liked her. He probably never would. That stubborn loyalty, the one she had envied even before she was sure he possessed a redeeming quality, would never be extended to her except as professionally required. But something in his head or heart said he had to give her a chance, and he listened to that something.

Amidst all his demons, it must be a strange voice indeed.

Elara had been brutally frank in their last conversation. She had let all her frustration drive her words, drive confessions she hadn't made to anyone. In response to his outburst she had thrown her entire past in his face, expecting to be either demoted or fired and for once too hurt to care.

And he, in turn, had changed. Had mastered himself, with visible effort and startling outcome. The sea change had manifested before her eyes and she had a feeling it was permanent. It was true that his artless kindnesses and sledgehammer smile might be permanently reserved for other people. Vierce Savins didn't like her, and probably never would. But he respected her. That was worth every risk she had taken.

She was fully aware of psychological tendencies of people in close proximity under extreme pressure for extended periods, especially where careful readings had to be taken in every conversation. Even if it was to avoid an explosion. She could separate herself from that – and consistently had throughout his mistreatment. Honestly, if all this did was unfray their working relationship, that would be enough.

"I'm sorry." Her career had taken flight with Havoc Squad. For once she was ready to trust the pilot.

---

"Vik," said Jorgan.

Tanno Vik looked up from his control of the speeder. "Yeah?"

"Did you just convince Forex that he needs to liberate the factory's stash of detonite and repatriate it for Havoc's use?"

"What's it to you?"

"It's a large shipment of detonite, that's what it is. You are aware we were supposed to just destroy that facility?"

"Oh, the facility's gone." Vik smiled wolfishly. "We're good."

"And where are we going to store this?"

"Boss's quarters not an option?"

Jorgan crossed his arms over his chest and glared. "He barely fits himself in there."

“Fine. Dorne?”

“Quote me the rulebook that says you can use personal quarters for giant piles of explosives.”

“Demolition is nine-tenths of the law, my friend.”

“You really like to see fur flying, don’t you?”

Vik shot him a grin. “Volunteering?”

Jorgan snorted. “Not on your life.”

---

We had an evening to kill. Forex was out picking off Imperial patrols. Kirsk had made himself scarce; maybe picking up another cargo bay full of weapons for the resistance, maybe...who knew. Vik, Jorgan, Dorne and I ended up at one of the few Republic dining halls available, the Bugtown cantina. I concentrated on not thinking about the Colicoid namesakes outside. There’s no reason a bug should get bigger than thumb size. Ever. Any planet where they do is a highly questionable planet.

There weren’t any tables free but we managed to snag four spots at the bar. I started with a beer just to steady my nerves. Between bugs, battles, and my own squad I was way more anxious than I’d have liked to be. The four of us chatted about the doings of the day with no problems. Work’s easy like that. Then a little about Balmorra in general, the economic situation. The weather. Dorne seemed mostly relaxed, which meant I could relax, which I was doing as hard as I could. Dammit. My arms seemed to itch from nervousness alone. Why I should be nervous about finally being nice to someone and meaning it, I don’t know. Probably because I knew I had no quick way to make up for everything I’d put her through.

But it was all right. Like we’d been getting by with since the post-Tavus vacation, except the ice wasn’t nearly as thin.

Jorgan yawned early. “I’m going to turn in,” he said. “Early day.” He nodded to both of us. “I’ll be up for oh four hundred.”

"See you then." I waved a bit. Dorne nodded at Jorgan, and then the Cathar was away.

"Got a few things I should do," Vik said to no one in particular. "By your leave," and it was as sarcastic as Weequay voice could make it, "Captain."

*Merciful Maker don't leave me alone with this woman.* "That's fine, Vik." My voice cracked. "See you in the morning."

Which left me with Dorne, which meant it was time to excuse myself and hit the head because I had no idea what to say.

When I came back I found a human stranger leaning on Jorgan's recently vacated bar stool. And, actually, leaning in toward Dorne. A lot.

I walked up just at the edge of the little circle between them; he caught my approach, looked up at me, and sneered with a bravado that really didn't fit his current situation. "Oh-ho," he said thickly. "Are you here to rescue the lil' lady?"

I shot a glance her way. The look on her face suggested that she very politely wanted no part of this guy. So I grinned at him. "Nah. She can kick your ass without my help, I'm just here to watch when she does it."

He stopped that gentle swaying motion for a second. He focused a bit to look me up and down: two meters of muscle that I'm told looks just as imposing in street clothes as I do in my workaday armor. Then he turned back to Dorne and looked her over. Then, without another word, he ran off.

Dorne beckoned me to sit on the once again freshly vacated bar stool. "That was unexpected," she said in a laughing voice.

Other times, other places. "Learned that one from a girl I knew back home." Memory tugged a little at the corners of my mouth. "It was in a cantina a lot like this, I sallied in to defend her the old-fashioned way, and she took me outside later that night and did her level best to chew my ear off using only words." Not much of an exaggeration; Illyris had had some very creative threats on the subject. She got prickly about that kind of thing. "Said if I undercut her like that in public again it'd start costing me teeth."

Dorne, still smiling, raised her eyebrows. "She sounds...spirited," she said dubiously.

"She was." In the best way possible.

Her voice softened and took on a little something of surprise. "She was special to you."

"Too close, Dorne." A warning to her, not a statement about Lyr. No one gets to ask too much about Lyr. And just about then I got enough of my mind off Kegled to remember to be self-conscious on Balmorra. "Anyway. The line's come in handy."

"I was only on my second or third broad hint, with stronger ones lined up. I would have been rid of him before long. Still, I appreciate the gesture. Even if threatening harm upon a civilian is strongly discouraged under Personnel Code Seven."

"Stars. You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all, sir," she said in her most businesslike manner. "However, the interpretation may be argued to be...flexible...during off duty hours."

"That's good then. This really isn't the time to be getting you in trouble." It'd be a perfect cap to the way we'd been going, but it wasn't a good time for it.

She arched an eyebrow. "I doubt that I would be the one disciplined for your threatening someone on my behalf, sir."

"Well, it's not a great time to be getting me in trouble, either." There was the smallest hint of a smile on her face, and I was feeling just cheerful enough to grin back. I finished the last of my beer. "I should turn in. See you bright and early tomorrow?"

She nodded smartly. "I'll be there, sir."

"Good night, then." I left the glass and made for the door.

I could do this. Yeah. Dorne was likeable enough when I was done being an ass; Havoc Squad might be working out better pretty soon. Socially, for once, as well

as professionally. Might be overkill, but I wanted to make it up to her. She might not have a lot of friends, all told. (And why had I never thought about that before?)

I didn't dream that night. That made two in a row.

## 26. Quesh: Forgetting to Breathe

We were almost to Quesh, a planet Tanno Vik derided as the worst idea since Hutt dancers, which, coincidentally, could be found on Quesh. I was happier not thinking about that.

We were in the holo room; the last map of the briefing was still up but only Dorne and Forex were studying it. "First election I ever voted in was the question of Kegled II joining the Republic," I said. "I was twenty. Last election on Kegled before then was when I was six."

"Six? And you let that stop you?" said Vik. "I'm disappointed, boss."

"I don't remember there being anything about ice cream or toy blasters on the ballot," I said. "What else was I supposed to care about?"

"What about you, Dorne?" asked Jorgan. "First election?"

"There was nothing for me to vote on during my Imperial service," she said. "Nor have I cast a vote here, but once Personnel Division clears me for full citizenship I'll be able to participate in elections."

"Three years, you ought to be a citizen already," I said. "I could go slap your Captain Kalor until he gets on with that if you want."

"I don't think slapping him would help," she said, and while her voice was exasperated she did have a little smile.

"What?" I said. "It's for democracy. Sort of."

---

On Quesh, oxygen masks are a requirement. You don't have to keep full oxygen on all the time, but you need the filters at least, and in some of the pits of this light-forsaken swamp there's nothing for you to breathe except what you brought yourself.

I almost knocked Dorne over on my way into the briefing room at base; I'd been delayed going to the refresher and she was just inside the doorway when I came through. I muttered a quick apology – there was still a briefing going on, no reason to make a fuss – and I stepped well away from her to listen to the local contact's talk.

There was some kind of additive to the standard oxygen tanks here. Some kind of precaution; I didn't really think about it until I strapped on the mask they had provided along with everybody else. It seemed fine for the first few breaths.

And then it wasn't. One breath felt a little less than adequate, the next hardly felt like air at all. I felt along the tubes; they didn't seem damaged. But the next breath was painful, juddering to a halt before I had enough air in me to keep going. I tried undoing the mask straps and had to settle for clawing the damn thing off; my hands were shaking. "Problem," I informed Jorgan when he turned around to check what was clattering away – my mask. I struggled to take in another breath.

Dorne's attention was sharp. "An adverse reaction to something in the filters," she said quickly. "Remove your jacket, Captain, I'll ready a stim that should help." She set her pack on the nearest table and started unpacking with quick efficient movements.

I turned back to Jorgan first. I was still healthy enough to give orders and I didn't want the entire squad just standing there staring at me. "Jorgan," I gasped, "get the lay of the land here, see what you three can do." I got to undoing my jacket and rolling up one sleeve. And trying to breathe.

"Sit down, sir," Dorne was saying in her most commanding voice. The woman can snap directions with the best of 'em; she just usually doesn't do it in my direction. I perched on the edge of the table next to her kit and concentrated on breathing. In, out, sooner or later it'd feel like oxygen was actually happening. Right? Spots were crowding in front of my eyes. Dorne already had a syringe out. She set a hand on my upper arm. "Clear?" she asked, a little softer.



“Yeah,” I wheezed. She was always careful about sticking needles into me. Even after all this time. I liked that about her.

Hell of a large gauge needle she jabbed me with. Didn’t matter so long as it worked. I kept on breathing while she eased the whatever-it-was in. Don’t panic. I was seeing spots, but I was staying upright...well, sitting upright...and this would clear up.

It did. Dorne hovered, watching for any sign of a worse reaction, but my throat was relaxing and my vision clearing. Good. Right. Fine. Breathe.

I stretched uncomfortably. The injection spot hurt; I winced and hoped it wouldn’t get in the way. I wanted to be out there, shooting. “Sorry to be this much trouble,” I said.

Dorne gave me an odd, very faintly amused look. “You can stop apologizing, sir.”

“Right. Sorry. – I mean, yeah.” That wince wasn’t from the needle pain. I rolled down my sleeve and slid off the edge of the table. “Let’s get going.”

---

I ran into Jorgan in the hallway to the refresher. After we backed away to our respective walls he shot me a funny look.

“What?” I said.

The Cathar snorted. “Just noticing. When’s the last time you shaved, Captain?”

A couple of days, probably; things had been hectic. I ran a hand along my jaw; yeah, definitely past due. Still. “You’re one to talk.”

---

Elara Dorne is an attractive woman.

I don’t have the words to describe my horror the day I realized that.

I guess the day I first saw her, for the two minutes between when I walked in the room and when I first heard her accent, I thought she was pretty, in the careless

way you might think some girl passing on the street is pretty. Gold hair, classic features, nothing wrong with her shape. But that cut short as soon as I realized what she was. What I thought she was. And then she was placed under my command, and, well, there is no way any part of my brain could deal with that. I lived with her like I've lived with women ever since I started spending most nights in resistance hideouts: that is, exactly like I've lived with anybody. Except I hated her a lot more.

When a woman earns above and beyond the respect just anybody gets, all right, that's attractive. In a hands-off way that I try not to think about unless the woman in question shows interest in me first. It's just less difficult that way. Maybe I took more risks back home; I never got used enough to anybody after I left to make the first move. But someone I admire is likely to be someone I think about.

Except her, because that's awful, and I'm her CO, and things don't turn around that fast anyway, that doesn't even make sense.

Things were different since we'd talked on Balmorra. She didn't quite smile most of the time when she met my eyes, but she met my eyes a lot more often, and there was a confidence there that seemed to say our months of work so far hadn't been a waste of time after all. I hadn't done anything to earn that new confidence, it was far different from anything I ever meant to talk about with her, and...I don't even know. She was different, that's all. The gold dust on her eyelashes was back, or I'd started seeing it again, and even her quoting rules all the time was somehow kind of cute.

This was terrible.

Maybe it was my fault for thinking about her nonstop ever since I first heard her voice. Most of that was hating her and the rest was trying really hard to practice not hating her, but I guess in the end it was still a lot of thought about her. Every day, every night, every mission, every rest, every plan, every recovery...that'd have to stop. Somehow.

I jumped and dropped the ammo belt I'd forgotten I was holding when she stepped into the armory. She was carrying a datapad like always. "Good afternoon, sir," she said. "If you have a moment, I need your approval on these requisitions."

“Sure.” I took the pad and scanned it in the vague and stupid hope that she would appreciate my thoroughness. Dorne always had it in order anyway; I’d come to depend on her being that organized. She thought of everything. (Except this, I begged any god that might be listening. Except this.) I swiped my ID approval and handed the pad back. “We on for dinner tonight?” I asked. “With the squad.”

The lighting here, I noticed, made her eyes look more blue than green. Which was completely irrelevant and I had no business thinking about. “I have reading to catch up on, sir,” she was saying. “I should have the time free tomorrow. I hope the rest of you enjoy yourselves.”

“Yeah,” I said, a little glumly. “We will.”

I watched her go, and told myself that this was part and parcel of the staring into space I did for a long time after she was gone.

## **27. Interlude: A Hell of a Woman**

Personnel Division Captain Kalor’s checkin was short and to the point. He was reopening an investigation into Dorne’s background. Before she could even defend herself he snapped out.

“I don’t understand what I have to do to satisfy him,” Dorne said, sounding genuinely shaken. “I have met every demand, answered every question...”

“And he’s losing control of you. To Havoc. Nothing’s going to come of it, Dorne. You’re clean.”

She looked down. She looked up, face pale and dignified and redrawn with slightly less strained lines. I struggled to remember how to put one heartbeat in front of the other. “It means something that you say that.”

“Least I could do.” I cleared my throat. “Come on, let’s finish this.”

---

I got over my shyness. Okay? It was nice to think about a woman who wasn't a walking conflict of interest, a woman it wasn't wrong to want. In fact I needed that, urgently. I called Ava. She came up in uniform and looking fierce.

That smile didn't make the fierceness go away. "Farmboy. I thought you'd lost my frequency."

"Busy here and there. I have a little time, finally. What are the odds we end up on Coruscant together somewhere in the next week?"

"I'd bet on it, Captain."

We met well under the city, not too far from her apartment. At her insistence. I bought a bomber sort of jacket on the way, and spent a long time contemplating my hair before deciding it was too boring to be worth pouring effort into. Then, with a deep breath, I headed to the cantina.

I saw her from the door. Short green dress, lacy in places, heels that drew a miles-long line up toned legs to hem. She looked radiant. Very self-aware-ly radiant.

I closed the distance and ordered from the bartender. I looked at Ava from the corner of my eye. She laughed.

"You look nice," I said.

Her mouth twisted mischievously. "Thanks."

It seemed wrong, leaving it there. I summoned up my nerve. "Are you trying to make me regret that we did this in public?"

Her eyes sparkled. "Captain. A girl might start thinking you're interested."

"I've had a lot of time to think." Mostly about things I couldn't have. This was the right thing. That...well, that wasn't.

"Mm. Anything fun come to mind?"

"We should probably wait until the actual drinks show up."

"You're more into this than last time, farmboy."

“There’s layers to get through.” I summoned a smile and pulled my drink into a protective curl. “How’ve you been, Ava? Busy enough that it took us this long?”

“There’s about to be a war on.” She sipped and raised her eyebrows. “I’ve been ruining Imperial days, just like you.”

“Warms my heart to hear it. Maybe we’ll work together again sometime. What about time off, do you have much time now?”

“Until tomorrow morning at least, if that’s what you’re worried about.” I thought about touching her. Her clean smooth lines ran down in directions that would freeze me up entirely if I let it.

“So what can we talk about before then?” I looked into her brown eyes, and she looked into mine.

She smiled first. “You could tell me how a guy from Nowhere in the Nothin’ sector ended up a commander in Republic spec ops.” She raised a finger. “I looked you up. Imperial occupation. Not fun.”

“No,” I said. “It really wasn’t.”

“But you made good.”

“I just go where they promote me. The Republic helped us get our planet free. I thought maybe I could return the favor.”

“Fifty or sixty times. Don’t think people ignore it when you disappear and two weeks later another planet flips Republic.”

“You watching me, Sergeant Jaxo?”

“Very closely, Captain Savins.”

There was just another drink or two. It was her suggestion that we have dinner back at her apartment. She had my shirt tangled down my arms by the time the kitchen heater was done.

She looked up across me, her dark eyes almost feral. “I am starving,” she admitted.

“That’s fine.” I was more buzzed than I would have expected from the proceedings so far. I settled my shirt the quickest way, which was to pull it the rest of the way off.

Her attention snapped to me, and scanned. “Merciful stars, farmboy.”

“Food, Ava.”

We ran for it together.

It was premade steak and vegetables, standard reheat fare, which was about what I would have to offer were I in her place. I fed her my sprouts. She did things with her lips on every bite. It felt like a promise.

But eventually she cocked her eyebrows. “Got something against sprouts?”

“Can’t stand ‘em.” I set my fork down. “I could keep going.”

“I don’t know. I could do with the second course.”

I was getting dizzy, the pleasant way. So I went on. I kissed her. She moaned softly and caught my hands, moving them to the straps of her dress.

“Are you sure?” I whispered.

“Farmboy, I’ve been sure since Coruscant.” She tucked herself up against me.

“Catch up already.”

Not much more to say in polite company. I don’t play around. I don’t keep score. But I know when a hell of a woman comes my way.

It was morning and we were using every towel she had to manage hair, modesty, and drying between. My legs were still shaking. I’d kept quiet so far that day but I had to ask eventually. “When do we see each other again?”

She scrubbed her hair and smiled sunnily at me. “Here and there. When we get the chance. I’m not registering monogrammed towels, farmboy.”

“I’m serious, Ava.”

Her mouth turned down. “Believe me, if I could assign you to permanent ‘me’ duty I’d do it. But we don’t live in that nice a galaxy. Call me when you get some downtime. Or I’ll call you. And if we don’t, well, at least we had one good night.”

“You think that’s all this is?”

“It is what we made it. No more...” she reached for my hand...”and believe me, farmboy, no less.”

What was I supposed to say to that, no? I kissed her and went on getting dressed. The galaxy had been polite enough not to come knocking overnight, but I had to get back to it eventually.

And I could run away from any other problems that came up. This gave me enough to manage that.

## 28. Hoth: Deep Freeze

Hoth was something else. We were there to find a Gand sergeant by the name of Yuun who was supposed to be able to slice what most people couldn’t even smell. From the briefing I had expected something like winter back home: well into the negative double digits and snowy, but bright and open and easy to navigate.

Yes, yes, yes, sort of, and no.

Speeders wouldn’t do in the cold. The staff sergeant ended up taking us to a long high tunnel studded with animal pens. I didn’t quite jump when he brought out the first tauntaun.

The animal had a mountain of shaggy fur and a pair of little red eyes protected by the solid curve of horns. The groom was strapping on a vast harness topped with a sleek brown saddle.

I set a hand on the creature’s neck as a sort of hello; he snorted and stamped in reply. “You sure I won’t hurt this guy?” I asked the handler.

“Big Vek’s the strongest fella we’ve got,” he said. “He’ll let you know if he starts to struggle, but you should be fine.”

“When do we feed him?” said Jorgan, eyeing the next stall down with suspicion.

“He’ll let you know that, too.”

---

So I spent two weeks helping this Sergeant Yuun to locate pieces of some Imperial codebreaker in the spread-out wreckage of a small Imperial fleet on Hoth’s surface. I was almost sorry I’d missed the party. Brutal conditions. But there was an up side to being bundled up to the teeth and beyond against the cold; the face coverings discouraged idle conversation and the extra insulation made it easy to avoid...looking at anything.

I tried not to get stuck alone with Dorne. I turned into an idiot every time she talked to me. And yet she seemed determined to talk to me. Every little thing. I took to making sure Jorgan or Vik was around, at least, to break up the tension. Forex she could just talk around, and did.

So when we were scoping the job that would break into an Imperial-held ship fragment hiding what we hoped were the last elements of the codebreaker, and the skill set assignment came around to where Dorne and I had to split off to disable an enemy comm station in the middle of nowhere, I wasn’t happy. I did my damndest to talk my way out of it, but the only way the plan made sense was for me and Dorne to do this while Forex, Jorgan, Vik, and Yuun were doing their own jobs elsewhere.

As soon as the planning was done I stalked toward the lift that would take us up to the tauntaun stables. Dorne hurried to keep up. She couldn’t quite match my stride. “Sir,” she said, “I’ve been meaning to ask. Is there a problem?”

“Nah,” I said. I kept walking. I tried not to notice the little curl of gold hair that had gotten stuck between her hood and her face mask.

“It’s just that you’ve taken to avoiding me lately. I had hoped that we’d have resolved that friction.”



"I'm not avoiding you, Dorne. I'm right here, aren't I?"

"Under duress, sir."

I didn't want her upset and I didn't want to have to explain. "I can't be talking about this."

"If I've done something to offend you it would be helpful for me to know what it is."

"You haven't done anything."

"Then why are you so determinedly staying away from me?"

"It's nothing. We do our jobs, okay? And socializing is fine. With the squad."

"But socializing with me isn't."

"Don't say that. Can we just go finish this?"

She looked at me a while longer, then set her jaw and gave one bob of a nod. "Of course, sir."

---

Captain Savins was staying away and he wasn't doing it for Elara's health. She missed those halcyon days between Alderaan and Balmorra, before he remembered to be self-conscious around her. Even one of his scowling snaps would be a welcome restoration. At least that was something genuine for her own sake.

But he didn't. He didn't get angry. He didn't get critical. He didn't do anything but try to stay away. What sin did he still think needed atonement? Why couldn't he just be to her...her thoughts faltered in confusion there. Why couldn't he be the man who dealt with her on equal terms? She hadn't realized how accustomed she was to his peculiar sort of attention. Now she was never going to get it again. The months of knowing he was turning himself inside out to give her the chance she deserved had seemingly ended in silence. Was that all?

Why did she feel like it shouldn't be?

He was kind now. Respectful. Helpful. Repentant. A force of nature on the job and a guardedly sentimental man behind his wry humor in the off hours. She never thought she would miss him while he was standing right in front of her.

But she did.

## 29. Hoth: Blood and Snow

I was seventeen, my hands were slick with blood, and Ryder was dying.

The Imps had stormed the building with thermal detonators; we'd managed to pull out in the chaos of the first flurry of shots, but some shrapnel had gone right for Ryder's neck, punching in just above his collarbone. The bleeding was unbelievable.

We stopped in the basement a few buildings over; we would've run further but Ryder was in bad shape. I should know; I was the one carrying him. The undertone of his brown skin had lost all color, and by the time I laid him down he was whimpering, sometimes pausing for a hard gasp as if trying not to yell.

Around us was chaos, voices, but all that sounded distant. It felt like my arms were bleeding, too, some scoring damage from the explosions. More blood. Not as bad as his. I accepted a bundle of cloth from someone and tried to arrange it around his wound. I could see an edge of something pale against the twisted metal inside his flesh. I wanted to take the metal out, cover him up, but I was afraid of what else might come out from all that red if I moved it.

Ryder's breath gurgled. The cloth was already dark, soaking, and I was dripping onto it from my side. Everywhere, hot, sticky, dark, leaking between my fingers while I pressed the sorry bandage, *soaked*—

"Sir!" I woke to pounding on the door of my quarters. My quarters. Republic base. Rapidly, guiltily, I hid my hands in the sheets before I answered. Stupid. "Be out in a second," I croaked.

“All right.” The pounding stopped.

I looked around. Just my quarters. Ryder was a long time ago.

I wiped a little when I pulled my hands free. Stupid. They were clean, dry. I knew that. But my tendons still remembered stretching in that final hopeless attempt to stanch the bleeding. My skin remembered the stinging cuts. Even looking at my own hands I felt like they were still in the other place.

I don’t forget. I don’t know who I would be if I did.

---

The speeder drive out to the day’s mission was long and quiet. Finally Dorne and I made it to the run-down facility where our target comm station was supposed to be. It wasn’t really a building; it had been part of a dreadnought or something before the Battle of Hoth crashed the ship into the side of a mountain. All in all not the friendliest place, but I figured the only real trouble was the cold.

We had just about finished up our business wrecking the comm console when we both heard some rumbling building up from outside and uphill. Dorne looked to me. “Rockslide?”

“Don’t know. Let’s move.”

That was when the ragged ceiling started to give way.

I would’ve expected light to come in, but there was nothing but roaring and falling darkness. No way could we get clear of the hull in time. Instead I looked around for the corner with the best-looking support beams in place, ones that might not fall with the rest. I rushed toward Dorne, pointing the way we should both go, and she nodded and ran for it. I angled to cover her – not even sure why, it’s not like I could do much against an avalanche – but we were both making good time.

Not good enough. A thick rush of snow slammed through the ceiling and fell in a shriek of crushing metal. I heard her cry out. I dove to grab her waist – better not think about the choking snow that rumbled and spiked the air around her, just move – and pulled to get her clear. When I was sure we had some shelter I let her go. She knelt, gasping loudly when she hit the floor.

The roaring quieted down. The trapped bubble felt big, but it was pitch dark. "Dorne?" I said, tugging my face mask away to free up both eyes and mouth. "You all right?"

"Negative, sir." Her voice was strained.

I pulled out a hand lamp and lit it. And then sort of wished I hadn't.

Dorne was on hands and knees struggling away from the snowy, metal-laced debris; she left something dark behind. She collapsed once clear and rolled to her back. In the harsh light of the hand lamp I saw a long dark red line angling from her side under one arm clear down to her hip and a little of the front of her thigh. Something had laid that whole stretch open and it was bleeding fast.

"Damn." I dropped the lamp with just enough care to see that it was more or less shining Dorne's way; then I went for the pack tangled over one of her arms. "Let's patch this up."

She pulled her own mask down, then got to peeling bits of her cut clothes away from the wound. "I can't see any debris in the wound from here. If you find anything, rinse it out if you can." She started struggling to pull off her coat as she spoke.

"Let me help." I hurried around and knelt to prop her up against me while helping ease her coat off. The section from side to over one hip was slashed through, and soaking at that.

Body armor came next; I heard her gasp in pain when she shifted its hard panels to pull the vest off. I backed off a little when she started pulling the wet cloth away from her thermal shirt. "I'll break out the bandages," I said, laying her coat out behind her. She would need a proper blanket under her soon to avoid losing heat through the floor. And another on top if she really had to have the shirt out of the way. And the smell of blood in here made me near sick, though I don't know how much of that was just my own panic.

I knelt over her and adjusted the lamp to cast some light on the dark stain cutting down her body. It glistened some. I'd lost people like this before. I couldn't be seeing it on her. No way. "All right," I said, a little unsteadily, tearing open a roll of

bandages. "Let's get started. I've done a little first aid before but my trauma certification is a few nevers out of date."

"Sterile gloves are the first step."

"Won't fit. Guaranteed." My hands were too big for any standard-issue sterile gloves in a normal humanoid-suited medkit. I took off my outer and possibly dirty gloves and poked through her pack for an antibiotic spray anyway. Don't know how much good it did getting sprayed on my glove linings, but I guess it was something before I got to work.

She reached for her pack and I handed it over, then got back to the business of making sure there was pressure along the length of that wound. The kit didn't have nearly enough bandages. "Take out your camp blanket," I instructed while I worked. "Better move you onto it."

"Acknowledged," she said briskly. She was loading up a syringe. Probably stims, or something made to control the bleeding. Smart. I should've thought of it.

Best bandaging material we had left was the thermal weave currently plastered to Dorne's torso with her own blood, or the same stuff currently on me. She needed the coverage more. Coat, off. Armor, off. Shirt, move faster, if this had been an artery she'd already be dead, move it. We switched off briefly, her handing me the blanket from her pack to shake out, me handing her the still-warm shirt to start tying around her.

"I'll call for help as soon as you're settled," I said. "Cold's more important. And stopping the blood loss."

"Agreed." She was done with the stim and was now adjusting her own bandages. "This is..." her voice faltered for half a second and then came back – "not good, but it should stabilize soon. What will very quickly become the greater danger is the cold."

I spread out her blanket near the back wall of the space, then half carried her over and onto it. I could practically hear her teeth squeaking from the jaw-clenching she did while we moved, but soon enough she was settled. I folded some of her cut and bloodied clothes into a kind of nest around her. "Lay back," I said. "All you have to do is rest. And tell me what else you're going to need."

“One more stim,” she said. I nodded and tucked my coat around her, then took her medkit back to find what she was after. “Vial labeled SG-08, analgesic shot. Inject directly into my arm.”

“Got it,” I muttered.

“After that help me with the chem heat packs in my boots. We’ll be needing them if we’re to be here any length of time.”

I was still working on the medkit. While I did that, she finished fiddling with the chem heat activation in her gloves, then she pulled out her holo and started hitting buttons. Stim ready; I peeled aside a bit more of her shirt and gave her the shot.

The holo crackled and went back to sleep. “No signal,” Dorne reported, and tried again.

It finally occurred to me to take a look around. The room was about half filled; it didn’t feel too enclosed in here. Just dark. The comm console we had sabotaged was completely buried. My hand lamp wasn’t nearly up to the job of lighting the room; it made a sickly-light circle around me and Dorne. No sound but for the two of us, no hint of light from the mass of snow and ice that had closed in here.

I’d better get back to being useful. “Let me see your boot.” I took hold of the boot she offered and felt along the inner edge to activate the emergency chem heat pack build into the lining. “Now the other.” She obliged. “All right. Blood’s still spreading,” I said, looking helplessly at the bloodied shirt bound to her. “You going to need synthplasma or something? You have any?”

“You haven’t ever performed that procedure, have you, Captain?”

“If you need it I can do it. Just tell me where to start.”

I followed her instructions, starting with bringing up the hand lamp to hunt for a usable vein. Not something I did to other people much. But I went on, trying not to think about the amount of blood she’d already lost. Synthplasma bag to tube, squeeze all air out of the tubing and needle apparatus, inject slowly, as evenly as I could. As soon as that was emptied I pulled my blanket out of my pack and spread it over her. It made for another layer of insulation.

The holo she was holding flicked into static. We both snapped our attention to it. "Havoc Aurek to Base," Dorne said firmly. The static just fuzzed, blipped, and vanished again.

Depending on the weather we both knew it might be hours before we got so much as the hope of a working comm link. She tried again. Again, the holo static flickered and died.

The room was quiet.

"I guess..." I didn't want to say we were just going to wait. She needed medical attention, not a lesson in patience. "I guess...now we...?"

"Now we wait," she said.

I took a look at the dark ruined mass of snow and metal. "I could try shooting free."

"Don't. The firing reaction will deplete what little oxygen we have in here. If that pack is too thick to shoot through, we'll asphyxiate ourselves trying."

"All right. How about punching?" I meant it, too. I could quite move a lot of mass when I had to.

"While the exercise may keep you warm, we don't know whether it will trigger further collapse. It should only be considered as a last resort."

"I don't see a whole lot of other resorts here."

"We can wait a few hours for help to come. If the heat packs are nearing the end of their use we'll reevaluate the situation."

I guess I didn't have anything else to recommend.

"Sir," she said, "if you would come stay under the covers. My body temperature won't be maintaining its level for long in these conditions. The additional warmth will help."

I swallowed. "I'd rather not crowd you."

"This isn't the time to be shy, sir."

She was right. Leaving her there to freeze alone wasn't really an option. So I lifted the edge of the blanket and settled in, resting on my side beside her. I didn't touch her. "How can you be so calm about this?"

"Panic wouldn't help. You're acting calmly enough yourself."

"No, believe me, I'm panicking."

Dorne rolled to her side to face me. Our eyes met. Maybe I said too much in the moment they did.

I edged closer, anyway, and stretched out one arm for her to rest her head on. I was careful not to hit her darkened bandages as I resettled my coat over both of us and then pulled the blanket over our heads to finish the little bubble of warmth. I wrapped my free arm around her. Under the thin shirt she had left, she was shivering. She shrank close and pressed her forehead to my chest. "Talk to me," she said in a voice that shook a little.

"What?"

"Multiple studies indicate that it's helpful to focus on listening to a human voice when attempting to stay awake." Of course she would be citing sources at a time like this. "And it...just talk, sir. Please."

"What about?"

"Anything."

"All right. I will. Don't worry. You'll be fine." I pulled off my bloodstained glove lining and set it aside; I would kick off its chem pack when Dorne's ran low. Then I touched her cheek. It wasn't as warm as it ought to be. "This all right?" I asked when I laid my palm full against her face, fighting the cold of her with one open hand.

She nodded, just barely enough for me to feel.

"Good. Then why don't I narrate getting us out of here." I fished out my holo again, passed it to the hand whose arm was trapped under Dorne's head. "There's



some secondary comm channels you can unlock if you have to.” Not my specialty, but you pick things up over time. I might remember the way. “If the standard-issue unit here can get something in the lower bands we might be able to punch through these walls, at least enough to send our coordinates. I would know just how to unlock it on, say, Imperial standard issue as of five years ago, but...” I was working while I spoke, keeping my arms around her while I fiddled with the holo. “I guess that’d make two of us. Not so useful now. – There, that’s the tech’s menu, finally. Now I just need to find the lowest frequency it’ll let us talk at. Probably won’t get visuals on the channel but it can push a distress call with coords.” I flicked through the last few keystrokes. No answer. I tried just sending the emergency signal, skipping any attempt at two-way chatter. It might work. It had to work. Then I set the holo back on the ground and wrapped my arms more closely around Dorne, resting one hand against her cheek. “Stay with me,” I said. “They’ve probably already figured out we’re missing; they’ll get on the signal right away. We’re not that far out, they’ll find us.”

She didn’t answer. She nodded a tiny bit against my chest again, though, as if to tell me she was still listening.

She couldn’t leave me here alone. I couldn’t be buried by myself and I sure as hell couldn’t be losing her like I’d lost comrades before. “You do not have permission to fade out, Sergeant,” I said roughly.

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“All right. Just so we’re clear.”

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“If help should fail to arrive in time...”

“It won’t.” I hugged her tighter, and forget what anybody thought of it. “Nothing’s going to happen, Dorne.”

“Captain. Listen to me. If help does not arrive in time. Please, let my brother know that I love him. And that I’m proud of him.”

I still wanted to argue. "Okay," I said instead. "I'll look out for him, all right? I...I hear hopping the fence isn't easy, Aleksei shouldn't have to handle it on his own." I wanted to say more, but this wasn't the time, not when I didn't have any right to talk in the first place. So instead I held her.

"Thank you," she said, very softly. "I can't stay awake much longer. Keep warm. Extremities, too." She was starting to slur her words. I listened over the roaring in my ears, straining to catch every syllable. "If there's more blood apply pressure and bandage over, don't remove the existing bindings. The heat packs are rated for twelve hours. With luck help will arrive by then. If it doesn't, just keep yourself warm at all costs."

"You'll be okay."

"Understood, sir."

"I mean it. I won't let anything happen to you." I looked around the inside of the sad little blanket shelter we'd made. Too little, too late, it looked like. "You'll be all right."

She sighed a little and leaned into me. We waited. I couldn't make myself take a breath without making sure she took one first. If I were to lose her now...no. No matter how long you live and no matter what happens, watching friends die never gets easier. "Dorne, don't do this to me. It can't end like this." Not now, before anything was settled. Not like this.

She didn't say anything. She just pulled off her heated gloves and twisted a bit, gasping with the effort, to tuck them behind her back. I tensed all over when she ran her hands up the one thin undershirt I had left, her icy hands flat against my skin; I tensed, but her effort was such a blind burrowing instinct I didn't have the heart to push her away. Instead I fitted my arm more securely around her and bent my trapped arm around so I could slip a hand in to cradle the side of her neck. She kept her ear and an angle of her face pressed against me. It was enough for me to feel her forehead scrunching up. "You are warm after all," she whispered.

"Damn straight," I said, hoping that it would help. "Stay with me. We'll...we'll go someplace warmer after this, as soon as our stint here is done. All right? I'd just as soon not go as far as Tatooine, but we can vote. If three or more squad members

are crazy we might end up there. Otherwise, I could take you all to Kegled. It's summer in West Ford City right now. It gets warm. Drive an hour out of town, there's nothing but grass and sun and the biggest sky you've ever seen. In fact it's pretty much the opposite of hunkering down in a pitch-black box at thirty below zero. Um." I cast about for something to say. She seemed to stop breathing as soon as I stopped talking. "Hey. It's all right." She relaxed again at the sound of my voice. "I could show you around the botanical gardens north of town. They lost some ground during the occupation, and now the city's closed in around it, but it's still an impressive place. There's some museums I bet you'd like, too."

I kept on babbling. It was sort of nice to think about home. Not nice enough to let me forget that the tiny-seeming woman in my arms was shivering nonstop, though. Not nice enough to take the fear away.

After a while my throat was starting to hurt. I fell silent. This time Dorne didn't react.

"Dorne?" I ran my thumb across her frighteningly cool cheek. "Elara?"

Nothing.

I clamped down on the panic. I curled as best I could around her, trying to close out the cold. I felt and listened to her shallow breathing like my own life depended on it. I waited.

"I'll keep talking," I whispered. "You'll regret telling me to do that." I would take the shame of wanting her to my grave. I just hadn't realized I would be taking it to hers. "I am going to give you more meaningless babbling than you've ever gotten before, and I know I've babbled before. Stay with me. Just stay with me."

My fatigue vanished in one hard jolt when the holo at my fingertips beeped. Fast as I could I grabbed and answered it. No visuals, but there was a voice. "zz – to Havoc Aurek, zzzou copy?"

"Havoc Aurek here," I said loudly. "Requesting immediate assistance, medevac required."

"One inc-zz." The voice under all that crackling distortion was probably Jorgan. "We have a lock on your loc-zzzk, will need to dig out. Get clear."

“Already there.” I shifted under the covers, gathered Dorne in my arms and got ready to move should the rescue tunneling collapse anything as far back as us. I tried to focus on the walls and the eventual rumble of outside equipment, focus on anything but the fact that Dorne wasn’t stirring.

I heard the digging equipment only seconds before something fell loose from the landslide wall. A building roar, ice scattering in every direction, and then a big drill broke through. It knocked a man-sized opening and then pulled back, letting Jorgan, Vik, and a blinding light in.

I stood up, keeping Dorne close. “She’s hurt. I’m fine. Let’s go.”

If they were talking I wasn’t really listening. Dorne’s shallow breaths were the only things that mattered. I carried her straight past them, and the others waiting outside, to the waiting door of a little snowhopper that could get her back to base. “Yuun,” I said, “go on with her.” He was the lightest of us; he could keep things in order without straining the hopper’s limited engines. Me, I’d better go with the ground crew. No matter how much I wanted to stay with her. She would be okay. As long as she was okay, everything else could wait.

“Sir.” I turned away from the departing hopper to find Jorgan offering a coat. I stared at it blankly for a second before my body reminded me that I was standing there with little more than a blood-smeared undershirt above the waist.

It was cold out. Huh.

“Thanks,” I said. I took it and put it on, twisting to stare after the departing medevac hopper all the while. She was okay. She was going to be okay.

“Speeders this way, sir,” said Jorgan, pointing. “Let’s get home.”

### **30. Hoth: Problems and a Solution**

The remains of Havoc Squad got the last pieces of Yuun’s assignment and turned it in to Command. The higher-ups were pretty excited about it. I was just worried

about Dorne. She had taken the last few days in kolto; they didn't let her out and about until we were just about ready to leave Hoth.

When they did let her up I might possibly have run over one of the maintenance droids in my hurry to get to the base's medlab. I didn't care. She was there.

When I got into the examination room I stopped short, reminding myself that sweeping her up in my arms was exactly the thing I shouldn't be doing. So...just look. It was a relief to see her up and awake. She was wearing regular fatigues. Standing straight as ever, no sign of favoring either leg. Good.

I looked at her. She looked at me.

"Sergeant," I said, trying not to notice how pretty her ponytail looked. Stars, I was just happy to see her in one piece. She seemed pale – had she always been this pale? "You all right?"

"Oh," she said. "Yes, sir. I expect to be fully ready to return to duty tomorrow morning."

"Don't push yourself."

"I'm fine, sir."

"Good to hear it. It's never fun getting put in kolto."

"Yes, I can't say I enjoy the experience." Her brow crinkled up a little and she took a few seconds coming up with something to say. "It did, however, give me some time to think."

"Oh?" I'd been trying not to.

"I had...a question. Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Of course." Any time from now on.

A smile sidled onto her face and took its time fading back into her regular earnest expression. Then she stepped past me and looked around.

"What are you..."

“We seem to have some privacy, sir.”

Dread set in. “And?”

She looked me solidly in the chin. “That ordeal threw certain matters into conspicuous relief.” She shifted from foot to foot. “There and elsewhere you have helped me more than anyone I’ve ever met. Serving with you has been a great honor. I have to admit, in spite of our initial differences I’ve...grown fond of you.” She turned those green eyes on me with an intensity that shut out everything else in the world. “And unless I’m mistaken, I do have some reason to believe that...you feel the same?”

“We can’t,” I said, my voice sounding a little higher than normal. “That’s just the near-death experience talking, Dorne.”

“You mean the one where you acted instantly to stabilize the situation, we worked as a team to bring things under control, and you made certain every step of the way that I had both every resource and every reassurance available? That near-death experience?”

My mouth was dry all of a sudden. “I’d do that for any of my people.”

“I know. That’s one of the things I admire you for. But...you did evidence more concern for me than you might for most. And I think this started before then.”

“I’m not starting anything. We’re not. Even if we” (that ‘we’ shocked me but I was committed before I could take it back) “wanted to, which would make no sense because you’ve got no reason at all to forgive me for all the stupid things I put you through, and...”

“Sir?” She arched an eyebrow, her expression guarded but curious. “You have put some thought into this.”

“No,” I said. “Dorne, there’s six different reasons we can’t even before I get to the non-life-ruining ones and two of ‘em I can’t figure a way around and...No.” I shook my head doggedly. “I never thought about it.”

Both her eyebrows were up now. “That sounds like a very detailed analysis for an idea you’ve never considered, sir.” She sounded slyly happy about it.

“You do remember me making your life miserable, on purpose, for months, right?”

“I seem to recall we had resolved your objections to my existence. Since our discussion on Balmorra we’ve been on fairly friendly terms, barring your mysterious new shyness.”

“Too friendly.” My mistake. “I’m your CO. Biggest red flag imaginable, right there.”

She didn’t even blink. “Sir, if you were going to abuse your authority over me for any kind of personal reason, you would have done so by now.”

“...Fair point. But you of all people have got to know that...well, that anything...would break every rule in the book.”

“I am aware that Personnel Code Section Two discourages romantic relationships between personnel, particularly commanding officers. But...” her voice slowed a little...”our records suggest that we are both experienced at navigating complex situations. And Personnel Code Section One does encourage personnel to spend time together socially. Correlations between interpersonal compatibility and unit performance are strongly positive.”

“Huh,” I said weakly. “That was one of the ones I couldn’t see a way around.”

She just smiled, her eyes sparkling. “Really, sir, all I wanted to ask is whether you feel the same toward me as I do toward you.”

“I...” Yes. If she was really crazy enough to like me. “I don’...” I couldn’t force the lie out, and I couldn’t in good conscience tell the truth.

So, genius that I am, I kissed her instead.

The second she ran her hands up my arms and pushed up to meet me I knew that the words didn’t matter. This was where I was meant to be. This, her, her mouth, the way she fitted her whole self against me, the way I couldn’t tell which of us was hungrier. I knew then and there. No matter what else happened, no matter what rules or plans the two of us might have had, I was hers.

About a thousand years went by too fast before she backed off a tiny bit to give me the most radiant smile I'd ever seen. "We should probably finish your list for completeness' sake, sir," she said in a soft lilting voice. "What were your other objections?"

I looked into her eyes; they were green as springtime, bright as summer. If there were other thoughts around they didn't matter. "I forget."

### 31. Interlude: The Gauntlet

Look, it doesn't go in strict order. Some days and nights are okay. Others...

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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.

I shot. I missed. The Imp got to the trigger. The blast picked me up and slammed me back; the impact with the brick wall broke something inside 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.

I was still alive. I wasn't doing anything, but I was alive. Lucky me. I remembered it was three people maimed and two dead and the Imp convoy kept going. Lucky me, I was still alive.

~~~~~

She was here. She was here. She was *here*, and it was hard to think of other things for long. I had never before noticed how few private spots there were on the ship. I had never thought I would want to sign something slower just to have a few seconds' more attention before she had to go act normal.



Act normal. Impossible. Dorne had this smile in her eyes even when her soft rosy lips were in completely prim shape. She slid past me in the hallway and for once the wall wasn't the side she brushed. It was setting off sensors I'd forgotten I had. If we didn't have a galaxy to set to rights, we would...

...stars. Talk, as soon as we had the chance. Talk and for once not have it be a legal defense or, let's be honest, legal offense. As soon as it could just be us. One more mission. I could hold out that long.

---

We had our hellish scavenger hunt on Hoth done. I had looks from Dorne – Elara – that reconfigured the entirety of my insides. We recruited our slicer Yuun. Him, along with Tanno Vik for specialized demolitions and the Safecrackers we'd wheezed through Quesh to get now breaking down the vessel's planet-based shield, added to M1-4X and Jorgan and me for a full team. We were ready for the assault on the dreadnaught carrying the prototype Gauntlet weapon. The only complication? It was made to shoot ships out of hyperspace.

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. Dorne, in a compromise with Command's health experts, stayed on the ship with a blaster in hand. I sent Jorgan and Forex go for the enemy ship's bridge to block any Imp response to our attack. Yuun went elsewhere to slice in and download whatever they could about the weapon. 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 the rest of the squad 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. Blaster fire was everywhere, the screaming noise, the acrid smell that came from air torn up too many ways at once. 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. All I had to do was shoot, but I wasn't doing anything. I wasn't doing anything. 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. Nobody I knew. Nobody, because they had—"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 didn't know which way to go. Vik was gripping my arm so hard it hurt through the armor. He pulled and I followed.

We only made it a few steps into the next hall before I felt it ripping up my back to yelp over my shoulder: heat that didn't ease up. I yelled and stumbled. Vik sprayed fire over me and braced his rifle to haul me up with one arm. All that mattered now was speed.

My steps pounded twice as loud now. Memory blurred into reality; I was just trying to get away. Sometimes I thought to look up and shoot down any kind of loose ceiling piping to cover our retreat. Had to go faster. I was doing something, dammit. I was doing something.

We blurred. Vik's voice couldn't penetrate the fuzz in my head. I closed my eyes and something hurt again.

And as I fell, I thought, I wanted so badly to rest.

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Forex covered Havoc to the last moment of sealing the airlock. Then they pushed off the Imperial vessel and set off the demolitions.

Jorgan kept things running fast and his squad kept up with him. Dorne had Savins in medbay. That was just...not something to focus on. Everyone else was just nursing bruises. From there the only place to go was Coruscant. Havoc had a debriefing to get to, and, well, one of their own needed a little work.

The trip went slow but it wasn't long on clock time. Captain Savins merited the best treatment, and that was a private room at Coruscant General. Jorgan figured the debriefing could wait an hour. He gave the swarm of nurses a few minute's head start and then headed up himself.

A medical droid stopped him. "Hello. Can I assist you with directions today?"

"I know where I'm going."

It sidled over to stay in his way. "This area is restricted. For the privacy of our patients, please return to the waiting room."

"I'm visiting. Vierce Savins." Jorgan maneuvered around the medical droid. "I'm family. Trust me."

"I find that assertion questionable, as you are a different species."

Great. A droid who thought it was clever. "He's adopted. Don't hold it against him." Jorgan pushed past and into the private room with the big kolto tank. Captain Savins looked about ready to bust of it, only he was unconscious. The droid finally went away.

Jorgan stood still, weighing his words.

"You're an idiot," he finally said. "And if this doesn't force you to straighten out I don't know what will. I just wish you'd told someone before it came to this. Just because I make fun of you for everything doesn't mean you can't trust me. And just because you're a royal ass doesn't mean I'd turn on you."

"Dorne hasn't given you a moment alone, only I think she finally went to sleep. I have a feeling she finally had the chance to prove something to you and you were

too unconscious to see it. Yuun has five dozen questions from his orientation and I can answer them better than you but you're the one whose job it is to argue the point. Forex has left the planet to hunt Imperials, and I know how much you hate it when he does that without you. And Tanno Vik is down below starting what sounds like a pyramid scheme to cover your medical bills. He's...strangely loyal, if rarely legal. But you're the center point. So heal up already."

He drifted toward the medical readouts on the wall. He was too familiar with those. Savins' vitals were weak, more like a winded kid than the industrial behemoth he was built to be. Dorne had said it would be all right given time and the best tube diet the Republic had available. Dorne had been saying it through yawns because she hadn't slept a wink until he was settled with the professionals here.

Well, Jorgan couldn't blame her. If he could think of just one way he might be useful right then, he'd be doing the same damn thing.

"Hang in there," he growled, and made for the door. "Sir." He walked out.

### **32. Interlude: Vigil at Coruscant General**

Elara was sitting in the exam room, trying to read a medical journal. The biggest practical exam of her life was floating in kolto a couple of paces away. She was grateful that General Garza had afforded them a few days off. A few days wasn't enough. But she could do nothing but face that one hour at a time.

It had been a very close call.

Someone came in. It was a Human woman, short, with chin-length greying hair and familiar-looking brown eyes. She went to the tank first and put her hand against it. Vierce didn't respond. Elara's heart sank.

The woman turned around. She smiled with crinkling eyes. "You must be Sergeant Dorne. I see he was exaggerating about the horns and forked tail."

Elara half smiled, taken aback. "I believe we've resolved that impression."

“Good. I hope you understand, his criteria for friendship are fairly simplistic.”

“Yes, I know.”

“I’m Ketrin Savins. You can call me Mama or Mrs. Savins if you like. I’m Vierce’s mother.”

“Pleased to meet you. Elara Dorne, sergeant. And Captain Savins’ medical officer.”

“Good things to say, I hope?”

Elara sighed. “He’s stable. Now it’s only a matter of time.”

“Once he was hit by a speeder and the speeder took more damage than he did. Given the slightest chance I think he’ll recover very well.”

“He’s stubborn.”

That was good for a telling gleam. “I dearly hope you didn’t find that out the hard way.”

“Hm,” she said politely. “He’s getting better.”

“Well, good.” Mrs. Savins eyed the tank. “May I ask how your brother is? Kirsik wouldn’t stop talking about him after they met.”

“He’s well, thank you. I hope their initial encounter wasn’t too inconvenient for him.”

“Oh, no. As long as somebody gets rescued from something he’s happy.”

“He’s quite the contrast.”

“He took most of the bubbles when we were parcelling out character traits.” Mrs. Savins eyed her shrewdly. “But he would make a dismal commanding officer.”

Something about this was strange and Elara had a feeling she knew what. “May I make an impertinent observation?”

“I don’t see why not.”

“As we stand here conversing in our respective accents. Captain Savins...he didn’t learn hate from you.”

Mrs. Savins’ eyes glinted. “Oh, yes he did. I recovered faster, that’s all.” She weighed Dorne in her gaze. “I’m sure he hasn’t told you this and I pray you don’t let him know you know it. His father was killed by the first wave of Imperials to take Kegled II. They killed him for fun. Unarmed, in his home, Vierce watching once he got away from where Kirsk and I were hiding.”

Elara swallowed. “I had no idea.” Of the specifics, at least. The sheer immediacy of his actions made more sense this way.

“I taught him that hate and I did a thorough job. It kept us alive for thirteen years. Now? He has to change a little. He said you defected from service in the Imperial military, isn’t that right?”

“Yes. Service was compulsory on my home planet.”

“A planet you gave up. I can’t imagine. Even before we had the Republic, we had Kegled.” Mrs. Savins paused. “May I shake your hand?”

“Oh,” said Elara, and held hers out. Mrs. Savins was warm and dry with a light but unmistakable grip.

The older woman let her hand drop, and tilted her head toward the kolto tank. “I realize it’s not your job to civilize my son. But don’t think you can’t stand up to him just because nobody else does. He listens to reason.”

“As I said. We’re doing better.”

“I’m glad.” She nodded toward an empty chair. “Do you mind?”

“Please.”

She sat. “I feel like I should be taking this chance to learn all about what he doesn’t tell me. Is Specialist Vik really a convicted felon?”

“Yes. Repeatedly. He was dishonorably discharged once already.”

“And they put him in Havoc Squad?”

“He performs surprisingly well under pressure. He saved V-Major Savins’ life.”

If Mrs. Savins noticed the slip she didn’t show it. “And how does Sergeant Yuun find lost things?”

“It’s a cultural art. I don’t pretend to understand it.”

“But you’ll stake your life on it.”

“All of us do. As he stakes his life on our skills.”

“Fair enough.” Her hands fluttered and stilled. Her voice, when it came back, was softer. “Do you know when Vierce is due to come up?”

“It will still be a week or two. He couldn’t even move under his own power when Specialist Vik brought him in.”

“He was willing to give his life from age seven. I just hope he doesn’t have to do it yet.”

“He’ll live.” Nobody had said it yet, but it was right and full and glowing in the air. “He’ll live.” In spite of everything. “I...suspect this is my chance to ask a hundred embarrassing questions about your son, but frankly I think he would prefer to tell me himself.”

“If he wants you to know at all, that’s accurate.”

“Still. It’s something, to know your commander didn’t just step fully armed out of thin air the day Havoc called for him.”

“If he ever tries to tell you that, tell him he’s full of it. And you can tell him I said so.” Mrs. Savins smiled. “There’s nothing worse than a boy who knows he’s a miracle.”

“Well...there’s not having him at all.”

Mrs. Savins made a gesture Elara didn’t recognize. “There’s that,” she said soberly, and pulled out something to read.

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“He’s probably not going to wake up in the time it takes me to get supper,” Mrs. Savins said judiciously.

Elara, who had been getting increasingly self-conscious about her vigil, looked up from her datapad. “You have time,” she said. “Are you familiar with the area?”

Mrs. Savins cleared her throat, looking a little sheepish. “This is my first time off Kegled. I’ve heard they serve food on Coruscant but I have yet to confirm that.”

“There’s a Bonta Hast just down the way. It’s a Huttese chain, they’re quite good. If you don’t mind some travel, I can give a number of recommendations around the Senate plaza.”

“I don’t want to be a bother.”

“Not in the slightest. All the taxi lines around here are on a three-dimensional grid system due to how deeply inbuilt the planet is; it’s not intuitive but once you know it you can get anywhere.” Mrs. Savins listened attentively. She really did have her son’s eyes.

“While I’m at it,” said Mrs. Savins, “you’d be welcome to come with me for supper.”

And spend an entire evening pretending she was in this hospital on this day out of pure professional concern? She was going to get answers about Vierce. But she was going to get them from him. “I’m afraid I can’t, there’s some work for the squad to do this evening.”

“Of course. Thank you, Sergeant.”

Well, we’re here for the same reason, she thought. That’s good for something. “Until next time, Mrs. Savins.”

“You’ll holo me if anything...?”

“He is stable in the top facility on the planet. If he changes it will be for the better. And I will call you, first thing.” Elara smiled and was gratified to see Mrs. Savins return it. “Enjoy your dinner.”

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Jorgan perked up when his holo showed Dorne. He answered. "Anything?" he said shortly.

"Nothing new to report. Has General Garza extended our leave?"

"Yeah. We've got time." Time enough for him to visit his girl over at the architectural college. It had been the most time he'd gotten with her since...well, since they'd parted on Ord Mantell. Jorgan was an old hand at turning Vierce's backhanded pluses into something good.

"I see," said Dorne. "Captain Savins' mother is on planet. She has been spending a great deal of time at the hospital."

"Hey. If one of my sons was in kolto and the other was Kirsk, I'd be in bad shape, too."

"Jorgan!"

"Kidding," he growled. "He's not in danger. It's safe."

"I thought we could bring the rest of the squad," said Dorne. "Let her know a little of what her son has been doing this whole time."

"Not a terrible idea. Do you have the others?"

"Specialist Vik claimed 'business meetings.' I think I've talked him around, though."

"Time and place," said Jorgan.

The place turned out to be a well-lit place that purported to specialize in mid Rim cuisine. There were some normal-looking things on the menu. Jorgan reserved more attention for the rest of the party.

Yuun still had his breathing mask on. That was required for him in nitrogen-oxygen atmospheres. Tanno Vik was, for once, the broadest person in the room, and he was waxing expansive. Dorne was done up with her usual bun and an unease that suggested her mind was still back in the hospital. It wasn't Jorgan's place to comment.

And Mrs. Savins? Small, still mostly brunette, with brown eyes like both her sons' and a conservative but not unflattering outfit. She greeted everyone with polite interest and a heavier version of Vierce's faint twang.

"First time to Coruscant, ma'am?" he said over appetizers.

"That's got to be the first thing anyone notices about me," Mrs. Savins said wryly. "I think my entire home city is about the size of Coruscant General."

That Dorne was polite and formal was pretty much as expected, and Jorgan kept himself on good behavior. Yuun was mostly quiet, though it did seem like Mrs. Savins was carrying a translator. Tanno Vik was...uh...Tanno Vik. Glowingly positive about Captain Savins and irreverent toward everything else.

And Mrs. Savins listened. Her anecdotes about Vierce were few, carefully considered, and apolitical. Well, so much for getting embarrassing leverage. The meal was long and comfortable, even after Vik decided on unilateral dessert and got a piece of cake large enough to feed the whole table.

It didn't, of course. It fed him. The rest of them kept talking.

Afterward Mrs. Savins got in a taxi for her hotel, a facility next to Coruscant General expressly for relatives of the patients. The others scattered. Jorgan found himself beside Dorne.

"Class act," he admitted.

"She's hanging on by a thread," said Dorne. "Do what you can if you get the chance."

Jorgan hesitated. Vierce had his brother and mother. Dorne had her brother. Jorgan hadn't been in touch with his littermates in years. Just...this and that. It'd never worked out.

But there was Havoc. And everybody in this little circle had that.

### **33. Coruscant: Waking in Kolto**

I hate waking up in kolto.

For one thing, it means either I or one of my comrades screwed up. Or, worse, that we got hit by something too big for all of us. None of those reasons is a good thing.

For another, it's embarrassing exposure in an uncomfortable wet environment. I don't swim. I usually don't wander around in my underclothes. It's just miserable.

And, finally, floating in kolto means I'm no good to anybody.

I found the tank-wall button that would summon assistance. A droid showed up within seconds.

"Sir," it said in a flat metal voice, "it's good to see you awake. I have orders to notify the staff when you wake up. Is there anything you require immediately?"

The mask over my face let me talk in an uncomfortable muffled kind of way. "No. Staff is good."

The droid left and shortly after that a skinny little doctor showed up. "Well, well, Captain," he said, "welcome back to the land of the living! How are you feeling?"

"Drugged silly," I reported. "Have you guys been keeping me under?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. You kept thrashing out of natural sleep."

"How long?"

"Eighteen days."

"*What?*"

"It's not my place to speculate on events on your job, but your last activity before coming here did its level best to shoot the entire contents of your skin out. You were lucky to get out alive."

The mission that'd gotten me shot up badly enough to wind up here. "My people. Havoc Squad. Lieutenant Jorgan. They're okay?"

“So far as I know. We didn’t check anyone else in with you. Actually, I believe you have several messages left by a Lieutenant Aric Jorgan.” He did something or other with a datapad. “We’re going to need to keep you for several more weeks while you finish healing up. You’ll need some physical therapy to get back into the game.”

“I think I like days better than weeks for that plan.”

“I think you don’t get a choice, Captain. You were almost dead when you got here, and that you were only doing that well thanks to some of the finest field cleanup work I’ve ever seen.”

Dorne. “Just sign me out of here as soon as you figure I can walk in a straight line. I’ll handle the rest.”

He laughed an annoying indulgent laugh. “First things first. I’ll leave your queued messages here. We can let you up for now; there’s a console over to your left where you can view your messages. After that I suggest you get some more rest.”

“Not like I have anything else to do. Thanks, doc.”

---

I dried off, put on the fatigues they’d provided, then sat down to bring up the first of the saved holo messages.

Jorgan’s image came up. “Sir. Mission accomplished and everyone’s in one piece. Excepting yourself.” Good man, getting what mattered out of the way immediately.

What followed was a string of short status updates about the job, with the occasional gruff statement of how he would prefer for me to be back in command signing stacks of paperwork. When I was through with Jorgan’s updates I made sure the fatigues the medcenter had given me were more or less presentable, then called him directly.

He stared at me for a long second before either of us talked. Then, with a controlled evenness and a dry edge, “Savins. Just when I thought I was going to get to keep the captain’s chair.”

“Jorgan. That was your great plan? Get the Imps to kill me so you could take over? Pure spite would keep me alive. You should’ve tried a runaway bullet tram or plague or, I dunno, something original.”

“Figured you would want to go out in glory, sir.”

“Ah, well, that was thoughtful of you. Better luck next time.”

“You coming off R&R any time soon?”

“They want to see me jump through some hoops first. I’ll clear it as soon as I can.”

“Good. I’ve got more requisition forms than I can physically sign in a year piled up. Dorne’s been itching for something to do, and when she wants something to do it somehow translates to her CO’s inbox getting stacked half a klick high.”

Of course. “You don’t need to tell me that. So, what else have you guys been up to?”

---

I spent some time in my room going through the rest of my mail. There was way too much of it; price of being out for three weeks, I guess.

The protocol droid blipped in the doorway. “Captain Savins, you have visitors.”

I switched the holo off, checked my hair, and followed the little droid into a visitation room. There were two people in there. “Sergeant,” I said. “And – Mama?”

Dorne stood up in a hurry. So did my mother. She was putting her holo away. I got a weird uncomfortable feeling wondering what they had found to talk about.

“My boy.” Mama rushed up to hug me tight. When she backed off she gripped my arms and checked my face. “Whatever they’ve been feeding you, they’ll need to give you more of it.”

She always did worry. “I’ll get more now that I can use forks instead of tubes.” I bent to kiss her forehead and then looked at Dorne. Mama stepped aside to let me go to her, but I felt stuck in place. I nodded. “Sergeant.”

“Lieutenant, sir. Since we got home.”

I had to smile. “That’s great. Congratulations.”

“You’re a major as soon as you can sign off.”

“Yeah. Good. I’m just glad to be breathing.”

“I’m glad to see it myself, Major.”

Mama cleared her throat. And just then the door opened. Kirsk walked in.

He looked at Mama, who clearly hadn’t been expecting him in the flesh. He nodded at Dorne. He glanced at me, then stared at the floor. “I showed up,” he muttered. After getting an earful from Mama, I’d guess.

When I stepped forward he did, too. I offered my hand. He took it. I pulled him in to wrap my other arm around his shoulders and squeeze. He squeezed back, hard. Somewhere along the line my little brother had gotten strong

I crooked my arm to muss his hair, then let him go. “You okay?”

He looked me in the eye with a flash of his normal humor. “Better off than you. Hey, can you spot me two thousand credits? - Kidding. Not that I would say no.”

I shoved him back, grinning. “Have you eaten?” I looked to Mama. “Have you eaten? Have we eaten?”

Mama cleared her throat. “I’m sure you and Sergeant Dorne have squad business to catch up on. Vierce, I’ll holo you when we have a place. All right?”

“Sounds fine. Thank you.”

“Until then, Vierce.” Mama gave me a last smile and headed out with Kirsk in tow, leaving me and Dorne alone.

I just didn’t think it would be like this.

### 34. Coruscant: Help

I looked around. It didn't feel like anyone was watching. So I closed the distance in two steps, swept Dorne up off the ground, and kissed her.

"I didn't mean to end our last conversation that suddenly," I told her.

She wrapped her arms around me as if she were afraid I might let her fall. "They said you might not wake up. Frankly, my initial evaluation led me to fear as much myself."

"I couldn't just leave things where they were."

She smiled a little shakily and kissed me again. Then she hid her face against my shoulder and just held on.

I freed up a hand to stroke her beautiful loose hair. There was a wave to it you'd never know was there when it was tied up in her day-to-day bun. "Jorgan hasn't been working you too hard, has he?"

"No. Hardly enough to keep my mind off things."

"Huh, and I always took him for the drill-sergeant kind of commander."

"He's been shaken, sir. We all have been."

"You can call me Vierce. Instead of 'sir'."

She gave a small nervous breath of a laugh. "That won't do in the company of others."

"No one here but us."

"Very well. Vierce." She was looking at my mouth instead of my eyes. Well, fine then. I kissed her forehead, then her lips, and touched her hair, her back, reassuring myself that she was here, with me, and safe. She was checking the same of me. Every touch sent a little thrill through me.

She pulled up closer and took in a tiny sharp breath. "In all fairness, Vierce, you should call me Elara when we're alone," she whispered, and got back to kissing me.

"Anything you want, Elara." The words took a while to deliver in the tiny breathless breaks we were occasionally taking.

"Anything." She smiled, then touched her nose to mine, then got back to kissing. "I like the sound of that."

"I could get used to it myself," I said. Once I got over the fact that Elara Dorne was flirting with me (and then some) and the fact that I liked it. I could definitely get used to it, just as soon as my head stopped spinning.

I had a question, though. I broke away. "Do you know when I can come back on duty? The droid was saying weeks. That's not acceptable."

Her smile faded. "That's...complicated."

"What? Why?"

She put on her medical professional face. "You might want to sit down."

I didn't. My entire torso felt okay and my back was prickling a little but not with anything like pain. "I'm healing up fine. What is it?"

Elara took one deep breath, then another. "You don't want to hear this, but it needs to be said."

"Anything."

"Specialist Vik made his report on what happened on the Gauntlet. You simply stopped firing for the better part of thirty seconds."

Something cold slid into my gut. "I got disoriented," I said. "It was chaotic in there. Vik got me back on track before anything happened."

She cast an eloquent look toward the kolto room. "You froze up, sir. In the middle of incredible stress, yes, but...that was nearly disaster." Her voice quavered on the last word.



Froze up. Me. I wasn't doing anything. "How many other people have reached that conclusion?"

"It doesn't matter, sir."

I sucked in a breath. "So, all of them."

She looked down. "We all support you, one hundred percent. Which is why I'm forced to ask." She looked up. Her eyes were green fire. "Vierce, when are you going to get help?"

The thing in my gut twisted. "I'm doing fine," I croaked.

Her brows plunged. "If you were fine you would never have left me."

"It's not going to happen again."

"Take steps to guarantee that. Please." She judged my face and went on. "If doing this alone is going to get you killed, I won't let you do this alone."

Help. That stupid thing that happened to other people. "Please don't start this."

"I don't have a choice."

"What do you want me to do? Walk up to HQ and tell them I have to take time off my regularly scheduled saving the Republic to talk about my feelings?"

"Yes. They'll understand. You have one of the highest-pressure jobs in the armed forces and you took that job after going through hell on your home planet. No one is going to blame you." Again she studied my face. "And as your medical officer I can order you to sign in under Medical Procedures paragraph 2. Counseling and medication as necessary."

Now that was something she had never tried to pull before. "So when you go on about caring for me. Is it me you care about? Or some imaginary Vierce Savins with all the rough edges filed off?"

"You might find it easier to maneuver without them." She frowned but her chin stayed high. "I could hold my peace when it wasn't killing you, but now? I can't let you be this furious. Not when it means your life."

“Then why are you pushing me?”

“Do I need a reason more than your wellbeing?” Her voice was rising, slowly, frighteningly. “I had the kiss of a lifetime and I had to face the possibility that it was the only one I would ever get!” I never, ever meant to put that pain on her face, but she seemed to determined not to clear it. “I will fight what tried to break you with every tool at my disposal. It would be easier but not necessarily required for you to join me.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and glared. Here was the catch. Here was where I lost her. “Why don’t you just say it?” I snapped. “You only want me if I’m medicated.”

“I want you happy,” she burst. “I want you healthy. I want you to have a peaceful inner life and I want you, any way at all. But most of all well. Don’t leave me just to prove a point.”

“Are you telling me that’s my choice? Do this or leave you?”

“I don’t know what else to call what happened back there.” She reached for my hand. I didn’t give it. “Please. It isn’t a large time investment, and it’s going to be with professionals who have every desire to help you. Vierce, setting your burdens down doesn’t cheapen the strength it took to carry them. I will admire you, and want you, and trust you, every bit as much as I do now.”

“You trust me so much you’re ordering me to submit.”

“I trust that you’re going to do the right thing. I am not going to record my insistence. So far as anyone except you and I knows, you’ve started taking an hour a week for personal projects that will benefit the squad. We all know we can rely on you.” She blinked hard once or twice. “And this is how you know you can rely on me.”

“I know that. I always knew that. Dammit, Elara.” I had a vision of some bespectacled witch doctor tearing me inside out again and sewing me back together wrong. She wouldn’t understand why that was worse than what just happened to me. And I doubted I could do it justice. There was one resident in my head. It was me. That’s where all lines of the past converged, and no amount of talk therapy was going to change that geometry.

But she was serious. And, after all, for thirty seconds I wasn't doing anything.

I swallowed hard. "I...I'll go."

She nodded without looking less anxious. "It's not a large commitment. An hour a week, and I'll handle any prescriptions."

"I don't need you babying me."

"I want to be sure you get them. Vierce, they shot most of the way through you. And I didn't know whether my best effort was going to save you or give me one long detailed memory of your death. That our enemies will try to do that to you, I can accept. That some unsuppressed thing in you forced you to let it happen? No. Not again."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Tell me again that this isn't going to change what you think of me."

"Not for a moment." Not an instant of hesitation.

I edged closer. She stepped in and hugged me, hard. I wrapped my arms around her, and though I wondered which Vierce she really wanted, I was grateful to be the one here.

### **35. Coruscant: Scraps Here and There**

I sat down to lunch with Jorgan so he could fill me in on squad operations. The two of us had a little table looking out over a big courtyard not far from the Senate plaza. Pretty place. The holostatues and moving crowds were soothing to look at. Anything that wasn't a kolto tank would've been nice to look at just then.

"Looking over my own med report," I said, "I am a little surprised I'm not dead."

Jorgan snorted. "Nah. Dorne had you in hand the second we reached the ship. Actually, she didn't sleep the first few days. Wasn't anything she could do once you were stabilized in kolto, but she stayed up anyway."

"She shouldn't have worried." I hated thinking that I'd made her do it. "You guys got me out in time."

"Yeah," said Jorgan. Then, carefully, "If it's not one thing with you two, it's another."

I didn't say anything.

He waited for a while, then stood and made to leave. I kept looking down over the courtyard. "Whatever happens, I wouldn't compromise the rest of you on her account," I said.

Jorgan thought about it. He nodded. "From you, Savins, I believe that." Then he walked away.

---

"Explain it to me again."

The anxiety shot - fittingly named - rested in Elara's hand, gleaming. Everything outside the closed medbay was silent. I don't think I could've dealt with anything else.

"It starts to operate at the beginning of stress events. It eases the body's natural reaction, giving you the chance, with practice, to choose your response on your own terms. It soothes what's automatic in favor of conscious processes."

"Is it going to...change me? The rest of the time."

"Drug reactions are never predictable, but Vierce, if I see a problem we'll discontinue treatment. It's just one injection per week, you'll hardly feel it. And apart from the reduction in stress events, no one else will have any reason to believe anything is going on." Elara leaned in. "This isn't taking anything from you. It's giving you space to breathe. Breathing remains your operation entirely."

"Oh," I said. It would be nice to be able to believe her.

"I'm not going to ask how your session with the doctor went," she said, a little shyly. "But I'm glad you did it."

I wasn't. Allow me to summarize the required first session, done remotely with a seemingly imaginary holo doctor:

"I dunno. No. Nah. Maybe. No. Nuh-uh. Ish. Eh. No. Sort of. Not at all. Not exactly. No. Whatever. I guess. No." I took a little pleasure in being as uninformative as I could. The therapist asked a long series of questions, sometimes pausing to let the silence hang. That's fine. It could hang all day, I wouldn't mind. When the allotted hour was up I cut the man off midsentence.

I didn't want to disappoint her, but dammit, I didn't want to try, either.

That's how it went as we shifted into new operations on new planets. Havoc Squad had never been stronger. And we didn't even need any psychopaths to do it. So, one up on the last squad there.

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"General Garza, sir." I saluted.

"Major Savins." She looked exactly the same as she always did. "I understand you've been cleared to return to the field."

"Yes, sir."

"Lieutenant Dorne, you've signed off on this?"

Dorne stood straight. "Yes, sir."

"Good." And from that day on she said not a word about any of my psychiatric ordeals. Garza and I have our differences, but that made up for a lot.

She directed the squad to Alderaan for some support of the local nobles against Imps and against the semisentient bugs called Killiks. It was nice to let loose. I kept waiting to feel the drugs they had in me, but I couldn't detect any change in my speed or capabilities. Maybe it was really just shoving back the physical reactions to other times and places. It was hard to tell.

I lay awake some nights, turning memories over, wondering if they were getting worn away. They didn't feel any different, though. They didn't feel like they'd stopped being me.

And Elara. Oh, Elara. We talked whenever we got the chance. We turned the little things we wanted to know about one another into the basic noise of crew conversation. Very brief discussions of squad paperwork were good for thirty seconds or less in my quarters, kissing like teenagers, smoothing rumpled clothes before she popped out in time to look innocent. Every touch was a fizz and a craving. I could've kissed Personnel Code Section One but I liked kissing her better.

---

My holo buzzed. It was Ava. Something in me quivered with a mix of recollection and dread. She hadn't said we were together. She hadn't said it.

She smiled warmly at me. "Hey, farmboy. Miss me yet?"

"Ava. You look great."

She looked me over. "Judging by your face there is one big 'but' where that came from. So what's the bad news, farmboy?"

"Something's come up. Some...one's come up."

"Aw, and where are you with her? Holding hands yet?" She laughed brassily.

"Turn your back on a guy for two seconds...I'm not surprised, Major. But don't you forget, you got it from me first."

"I am in no danger of forgetting you."

Her smile turned sweet. "Reeeally?"

"You might have noticed I tend to mean what I say."

"Yeah, I know." Her eyes danced even through the crappy connection. "Take care of yourself, farmboy."

"I am still not near any farms."

"See? You don't always mean it."

I could tangle with her a few moments longer. But I didn't. "Take care, Ava. I've got to go."

### 36. Alderaan: Building in the Snow

I was meditating on how utterly boring the training document before our collective eyes were when Elara poked her head in. "Excuse me, Major?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to open one of the underside panels on the ship to check something. I can't safely reach it. Could you assist?"

"Sure." I set down my datapad and jumped to join her.

Vik and Jorgan watched them go. "I coulda done that," Vik opined to no one in particular.

Jorgan growled low in his throat, half grinning. "I'm not sure you could."

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Winter is my favorite season.

Growing up it was a season of hide and seek, of tunneling and building, of shaping with care and throwing with abandon. It was sledding and out-shoveling the pusher droid and getting a clean start every time the sky agreed to it. Even when there was blood. Maybe especially when there was blood.

I was seventeen. The snow cavern was pretty well hidden against a blanketed boulder nine times my size. But I saw the entrance and I saw Dep's scarf trailing outside.

So I walked up. "Dep," I said loudly, "if you are playing 'trapped in the snow with a beautiful girl with scant hours to live' I am going to thump your head into the next county."

“Whaaat?” said Dep, sticking his head out. “Get your own.”

“We’re making the dragon.”

“Great. Have at it.”

“Fine. I’ll do the scaly bits myself.”

“You always screw up the scaly bits!”

“Tough.”

“Dammit, man, I’m coming.” A small coo from within suggested disagreement. “I’m sorry, baby, this guy can’t be trusted with art.” Nerf shit. I did the best dragon spikes in West Ford City and everyone knew it.

Dep wriggled out, and we raced for the sculpting meadow where the entire Ridgeside neighborhood was at work making the biggest creature the county’d ever seen.

~~~~~

She was close, practically inside my unzipped coat. Only the knowledge of the team in the ship above kept us from...well, moving the coat more. “That’s done,” she said crisply. “Walk with me?”

The path wrapped around the Alderaan mountainside. I hoped she didn’t mind the bulk of the snowy mountain above, and it seemed like she didn’t, though she did keep her hands and neck well into the fluff of her coat. We reached a bench tucked nearly out of sight facing a high narrow waterfall. The rumble reminded me of factories, tireless, and the cap of ice over the edge of the falls was like a bridge growing day by day, almost ready for a daredevil’s step.

Elara and I talked.

It had started in dribs and drabs, little comments while we were handing off paperwork and equipment. Then one evening we’d gone for a walk outside the ship - no place private, no place to be with her like that, but out of earshot, at least. We found spots like that whenever we could.



We talked about all kinds of things. Her time as a Republic soldier. Mine. The planets we'd seen, the people we'd met. Her mind was orderly and formal, clean-cut and deeper than I'd given her credit for. Her humor was slyly observational, her laughter musical and rare. We talked about books we'd read and celebrations we'd been to. She said she hadn't gotten to talk about these things much of anywhere since she'd hopped the fence. I said she could talk all she wanted.

I wanted her like a kid wants snow. Never certain day to day, but we'd already tipped into winter and any minute, just any minute the world would transform. The least touch would be the highlight of the year. Her fingertips in the hallway, her hair tucked under my nose when she passed by in the mess. Word by word, flake by flake, and class was well and truly interrupted as I pressed my face to the window.

We left the deep past alone. The resistance. The Empire. Mine wasn't hers yet, and it would be a long, long time before hers could be mine. I'd known her less than two years, all told. West Ford City could wait. As it is we talked like we'd come into existence the day we'd joined the Republic. In a way it was true.

We sat on the bench on Alderaan. We kept our voices low, running comfortably beneath the roar of the falls.

Elara perched upright, swathed in her coat. "I was going to go into the medical corps for hospital work, but that particular path was blocked."

"By who?"

"A major in the corps. He expected...certain considerations, which I did not grant. So, I was sent to the front lines instead."

"Elara, you should've said something."

"And be believed by whom, exactly?" I hated it when she said bleak things. There was something fundamentally wrong with a galaxy in which she had reason to feel bleak. "I did file a report. Nothing was done. I was packed on the next transport to Taris to consider my career as it will be in the presence of certain elements."

And if she hadn't been? I'd never have met her. Never knowing her. Was that too high a price to pay for living in a reality with ethical people? "I'm sorry. I never even thought that...this isn't what you wanted."

Her head came up sharply. "I'm making a difference here, sir."

"That's not the same thing as being happy."

"I'm suited to combat medicine. It would be a waste of abilities to put me in a clean room fixing things after the fact." She looked in my eyes and when her voice came back it was softer. "I do want this."

"Certain considerations included?"

"You're nothing alike. You were difficult but never..." her mouth twisted..."indecent."

"For lack of imagination. I didn't think of you like that. I couldn't. I was too mad."

"Really? I...oh." She looked away.

"Now what does that mean?"

She kept her eyes hidden under gold-dust lashes. "When we met, on Taris. You cut a rather dashing figure."

"You must've seen the non-scarred side."

"No. I saw you as you were. Brave. Distinguished. I was somewhat...impressed, until you spoke to me."

Spoke down at the Imp, she meant. "What a prince, huh?"

She raised her eyebrows in conspicuous agreement. "He's improving," she said innocently.

"Just tell me if it ever...if you change your mind...I know I'm not the poster boy for self-control but I never want you afraid to talk to me and I never, ever want you to regret being in this outfit."

“It has been the greatest honor of my career.” She smiled in a way she hadn’t since the first time she’d ever said it. “And I think certain other things are going well, too.”

I kept my balance on the snow when I knelt at her feet. I gathered her hands in mine. They were square and warm. “I just need to keep that up, then.”

Flakes were falling. I could taste them between our mouths. One little snow collapse couldn’t change some things: Winter is the warmest season when you’ve got a place to shelter in.

### 37. Interlude: Things Discovered

“We’ve got something,” said Jorgan.

“Great,” I said. “What?”

He rolled his eyes. “The Deadeyes, sir.”

I sat up. “We’ve got two days left on this job.”

“I know, sir.”

“You think they’re moving before then? I do not want to pounce on where they’re not this time.”

“Far as I can tell? They’re going nowhere.” Jorgan scoffed. “The advantage of prisoners.”

“All right. Soon as we clear this mission, I’m all in.”

Havoc never did catch an objective so quickly.

And then it was Hoth. Why Hoth? Well, as destinations go, it’s pretty hard to get out of. And I had a feeling the Imps didn’t care if they lost ten or twenty percent of their prison population to exposure.

We hurried.

The Republic base commander didn't quite laugh when we told them where we were going. He did, after a lot of coaxing on Elara's part and bullying on M1-4X's part, agree to provide transportation to the prisoners we freed. Because if we were going to do this, we weren't going halfway.

Yuun took the lead with cool professionalism, so to speak. Ripping through Imp security is a personal favorite activity. We opened cell after cell, leaving the cooped-up soldiers to run back to the entrance (or, for the braver, to go open cells in other blocks). It was at the very end of a block where we found half a dozen men waiting at the forcefield, trying to get a look at what was causing all the noise.

(Forex. Forex was causing all the noise.)

One stepped forward. In the insulating gear he looked just about the same as everyone else. "Sir?"

Jorgan popped off his helmet. "You guys still breathing?"

Noises of surprise made the rounds. "More or less," said the fastest one. "Didn't expect to see you here, sir."

"Funny, I was going to say the same thing." Jorgan jerked his head toward a helmeted man. "Who's this?"

The man pulled his helmet off. His brown hair was slicked against his temples and neck. "Special Agent Zane. You just can't leave well enough alone, can you?"

Something tugged at me and I listened to it. "Dorne," I said, "please go check the entrance."

She cocked her head. "Sir, I..."

"Dorne. Take Forex. I do not want extra guard patrols coming in here."

"Yes, sir."

Vik chuckled as soon as he thought she was out of earshot. "So who is this winner and why couldn't the lawful contingent meet him?"

"I am the lawful contingent," I growled. "Vik, this is Special Agent Zane. Special Agent Zane was responsible for calling the SIS off the search for the Deadeyes after they were captured. Zane, what the hell are you doing here?"

"My job," he snarled. "Apparently I need to repeat the memo to the ones who weren't on the distribution list. This op was never about rescuing POWs. We've been after one thing: Dusk Nine."

Judging by the mumbles given by the other prisoners, this was new information to all. "Impossible," said Jorgan. "That place is just a myth."

"Is it?" He took in me, Vik, Jorgan, and Yuun with a sneer. "We'll never know now, thanks to the heroic Havoc."

I cleared my throat, waiting for the explanation.

"It's nothing," said Jorgan. "Just a spook story the Imps concocted to scare us."

Zane took up the charge. "Next to the Emperor's location, Dusk Nine is the Empire's best kept secret. Hundreds of black ops projects are born there."

"It's also a prison, according to the rumors. The things that supposedly go on there, too horrible to be real."

"So, Imperial," I repeated. No more description necessary and probably, for everyone, no more wanted.

"We need more," said Zane. "We released thousands of bugged soldiers into the Imperial penal system, hoping for a bite."

"Thousands?" It was one thing to say I appreciated the scale of the Republic. It was another to face it. "Did Garza know about this?"

"This was an SIS show. She would only get in our way." He scoffed. "Not that it matters. The brass at Dusk 9 weren't interested in common soldiers. But how could they resist an SIS agent?" He spread his arms as if trying to convince

someone, anyone, that he was a catch. "I was waiting transfer when you two geniuses showed up."

"I could leave you here," I said flatly. "I'm sure their cleanup crews would find you."

"And shoot me for coming out of your spree alive, thanks. I'm going back to Coruscant. Your superiors will hear about this."

"About your program to sell thousands of good soldiers into whatever mercy the Empire feels like offering? Oh, yes. Please keep me involved on that holocall."

"I can make your life extraordinarily difficult, jarhead."

"Mutual, asshole. Deadeyes, form up. We're leaving." It took some will to turn my back on Zane but I did it. "Vik, bring up the rear. If Zane puts a toe out of line shoot him."

"Sir," said Jorgan. He didn't sound like much of anything. He just sounded.

"Fine. Vik, with me." I let Jorgan trail behind.

There were voices, low, all the way. Then there was a blaster report. I turned around, hand on my weapon.

Jorgan looked at the falling person next to him. "Toe out of line, sir."

It was possibly more justice than Zane would've gotten anywhere else. "Fine." Once I'd reported this mess the other prisoners would be won back, someday, somehow. What the SIS had started, spec ops could finish. "Let's step it up."

---

Weeks went on. I didn't think I said anything to Mama, other than that Dorne and I were on better terms. She sounded happy to hear it. The fact that she'd talked to Elara on Coruscant raised so many questions I didn't know how to ask. So I didn't.

Then Kirsk called.

He looked healthy and unhurried, so I wasn't sure why he wanted to talk to me. "Kirsk," I said. "That desperate for a date to the prom?"

"Big brother!" he said, beaming. "I leave you alone for two seconds and you choose then to get your act together?"

"This...isn't about the prom."

He gestured impatiently. "I was going to watch you swallow your pride here. I was giving it another few years at least."

"What is this about?"

"Oh, I don't know. Blonde, more competent than you, flunked the background check?"

The pain in my neck, which usually showed up within five minutes of Kirsk opening his mouth, made itself known. "Assuming we're talking about Lieutenant Dorne, I wasn't aware I needed permission to talk to her."

"Fine. That's great, I missed your epiphany. I can still say 'I told you so.'"

"...But you didn't."

"Yes I did! I practically threw her at you on Balmorra!"

"You got arrested on Balmorra, Kirsk." And, lying, "I don't think any of our conversations surrounding that incident had anything to do with El-Dorne."

"Really?" He frowned thoughtfully. "I could've sworn I mentioned it." He perked up. "But you can't argue that I gave you the assist on Nar Shaddaa. Remember? With her brother? I handed all credit for that operation to you just to give her the tiniest bit of evidence that you're not a complete idiot."

"That's not the same as telling me so."

"What matters is that I had the clue before you did. Stars, contrary much? How does she put up with you?"

He was still grinning, so I didn't feel the need to worry. "She, unlike some people, appreciates my sparkling personality," I said.

"Sparkling. Yeah, right." He folded one arm across his chest and brought up his other hand to run his fingertips over the cybernetics at his temple. "Anyway, I meant to ask, you got out of your top-secret mauling okay? You looked okay for the three hours you had to spare, but with Mama I never know if you're just putting on a tough face."

"I healed up fine. Thanks for asking."

"Hey, I do want you alive. The galaxy would be a much duller place without you."

"Feeling's mutual," I fake-muttered.

"Oh – one more thing, as long as you're here." He got back to fiddling with his cybernetic arch. "The way things are now, you are...you know, happy, right?"

"Yeah." No doubt there. "More'n I've got any right to be. She's the best thing you could possibly have failed to notify me about."

"Damn, brother." His grin widened into a bright white smile. "I thought you'd never make it."

### **38. Interlude: A Brother's Concern**

Aleksei Dorne stood up when his sister entered the conference room. There was a guard at the door and a stranger boredly tinkering with a datapad serving as escort.

Coruscant was an enclosed planet after the grand elements of Dromund Kaas, but it had its moments.

Elara rushed in and caught herself, looking for all the world like she'd been caught sneaking treats. Aleksei opened his arms and gave her the choice. She smiled with a warmth he'd half forgotten and hugged him, hard.



"Aleksei," she said. "I'm so glad to see you."

"You're looking well, Elara." And she did. She had a spring in her step she hadn't had on Nar Shaddaa, when she'd started him on the rough path of defection to the Republic. "Havoc performing to spec? Classified, of course."

"Exactly so." She laughed a little. "What about you? The interviews? The training? Have they tired you out yet?"

"It takes more than interaction with rules encyclopedias to faze me, sister mine. This is just new rules."

"The others? Your men?"

"Separated. Transitioning, all of us. We have some correspondence. Personnel Division gets final control over what goes through, of course. And you? Should I ask about the hulk?"

Elara dimpled. "We are on much better terms."

"Uh-huh. And what else aren't you telling me?" The subject had wrought a definite change. "You're practically bubbling."

"It's nothing. This isn't the place."

"And what place is there for the two of us? Forgive me for gossiping but there are things Personnel Division is going to have to overhear sooner or later and I'd like to be in the room to hear them too. It'll be practically like old times with the sentries around the compound."

"It's nothing." That smile was decidedly mixed. "Please don't name names."

Her nerves drained his good humor. "Why? What has he done?" He had the Imperial streak of martial egalitarianism, but one could take militant care of one's equals. Elara always had.

"Nothing. We have been completely proper." She was blushing.

Which just made Aleksei nauseous. "Elara, you took the same psychology courses I did. When someone's a prisoner that long..."

Her eyes sparked. "I wasn't in prison. This is my career!"

"Didn't the Empire teach us that's the same thing?"

"We aren't Imperial anymore."

"And you don't have to obey a man just because he outranks you!"

"He makes me happy!" He didn't have to search hard to know she meant it.

"When he looks at me and I see my worth in his eyes, it's precious. It's like nothing I've ever seen."

And exactly when was Mr. Precious going to take her home to Mother? No time soon, Aleksei guessed. He loved her too well to say it. "And what if you change your mind?"

"Then he'll do what's right. He has never asked more or less than that from me."

Aleksei remembered the day of his defection very well, and the man who had overseen it with a look that suggested he'd rather be shooting. He had loomed over the proceedings in brittle silence, only barely tolerating the voices of the Imperial strangers. Vierce Savins was three angry gundarks stacked in a trench coat, but Elara wasn't in the habit of being wrong about people. After all, if she could give the benefit of the doubt to a brother who had let her disappear, condemned her for it, and devoted his allegiance to the sworn enemy of the people she had disappeared to...well. If she could do all that, Major Savins might yet grow into her trust.

It made him wonder what would make Elara risk censure for a romantic attachment. She had to be serious. Then he had to find a way to cover for her. All he had to do with his time was study rulebooks. He might yet find something Elara had missed. That hadn't often happened in their time together on Dromund Kaas, but it wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

The thirty-day delay on getting communications through might....well, he would deal with that when he had something to send.

---

“Vierce, what are we doing?”

“Sneaking,” I said definitively. “We’re sneaking. I’d forgotten how great that feels.”

“Is that the appeal?” she said archly. “The secretive nature?”

“No.” I touched her cheek. “And you know it.”

“So what are we doing?”

If it were any other time, place, situation, woman, the answer would be different. But I didn’t see how it could be different here. “Waiting for the rules to change.”

“That could only mean one or both of us leaving.”

“Let’s find better rules.”

She stared into my eyes. “I will,” she said. “If I have to write them myself.”

---end of Part II---

## **Part III**

### **39. Belsavis: Uncomfortable Pasts**

Elara and I were in the medlab. She was checking boxes on a datapad while I shuttled supplies from cabinet to cabinet. I wasn’t exactly sure what this exercise was for, but it gave us some time to talk. And I loved the imitation of domesticity. I wasn’t sure I should tell her that yet. Then again, she wasn’t complaining about this arrangement, either.

“Jeans,” I was saying. “You’re familiar with them? I hope?”

"In theory," she said in her pleasantest voice, not that she had a bad one. "I'm told they're quite comfortable."

"We could find you some." I almost invited her to West Ford City then and there. Only the thought of everybody else hearing her accent stopped me.

"I...never had a reason. After I finished at the Academy I kept some civilian clothes. Killik silk, the items I didn't want to part with. Somewhere along the line that got left behind. I was an Imperial officer. I had my eyes on higher things."

How serious she was when she said that, I couldn't tell, but I stopped shelving. The Academy. An Imperial officer. One of those things that would have to come out sometime. Hell, it would have to come out a lot. This was her. This was the woman I was crazy about. This was us talking like I'd wanted, idiot. Like I wanted to a lot in the future. This was her, and in the past she'd been an Imperial officer.

Elara set down her datapad. I didn't look at her. In a silence so deep it dizzied me she walked past me, staying well clear this time, and stepped into the doorway.

"Don't," I said, still staring ahead. "Tell me whatever you want."

She frowned at the doorframe. "If this is so much work, you could stop." She swallowed and her voice came back colder. "You could have stopped a long time ago, before we got...involved."

"And stop caring about you?" No. Not ever. "Look, I'm not...great at this. I'm not forgiving or very accepting or much of anything useful. But if there is one thing in this life I believe it's that I have to try. Because I am never going to meet another woman like you."

She looked at me. Her eyes were worried but her mouth was starting to turn.

I had to follow up and I had to do it fast. "You, uh. You got to use the silks much in your old career?"

"No," she said neutrally. "Not really."

"Come back," I said, and managed to get my hands moving again. "We can find you some civvies sometime if you want. Could be fun."

“Dressing me would be fun?” she said warily.

“No, seeing you get to touch something that isn’t made of structural-grade synthvin would be fun. Are we going to finish this?”

She hesitated a moment longer. Then she bowed her head and turned back in. “Very well,” she said, and came back.

I shelved the irrelevant box in my hands while she passed by. “Too much?” I was only partly talking about the praise.

“No,” she said, and touched my shoulder. “It’s difficult to argue when you say things like that.”

“It’s the truth or nothing. You know that.”

“I know. I hope we can be direct.”

There was only one thing to say and it only cost me a little to say it. “Always.”

---

There were rumblings from Command. General Rakton, the ruthless Imperial commander, was on the loose, and we needed to pull together the support to knock his armies out from under him.

Which is how I came to Belsavis, the prison world.

“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?”

“What you’re doing is giving these men another chance to prove themselves, Major. 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 at the height of my power to do good was help out soldiers who had slaughtered civilians. Imp civilians, and once I would’ve cheered, but we were supposed to be better than that. Wasn’t that the point?

So Havoc Squad flew to 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, Major. 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.

#### **40. Belsavis: Hail**

Belsavis was not a friendly place for speeders. Inside the prison compounds, the roving gangs of recently escaped prisoners tended to swarm anything valuable. Outside the compounds the jungle beasts went nuts for any sign of sentient activity. Or any activity, probably.

So we were all walking – all of us but Tanno Vik, who had nobly offered to help Warden Graal with security back at the air-conditioned base – down an old

beaten path between banks of colorful and possibly fatal plants. So far I had zero reasons to trust the place.

Something loud tapped in the trees. I looked up, but didn't see anything moving, so we pressed on.

Another tap. Then a third, then a bunch at once. And then hard little particles started breaking through to the ground.

"Is that what I think it is?" said Elara.

I knelt to check the nearest fallen pebble. It was ice, rapidly melting. "Hail," I said. "This is hail."

"Hail? We're in a jungle, sir," grumbled Jorgan. "That's just not right."

"It's a jungle pocket on an ice planet," I said. The fact had been bothering me ever since we got here. "I'm not sure how many memos on how weather works really make it all the way around here."

Something clattered off Jorgan's helmet. "Not enough, obviously."

Yuun chittered, his voice and its translation sounding clear over comms. <There is a ledge off the road two hundred meters back.>

I turned right around to start walking. "Let's go, then. I don't know how much worse this is going to get." As if the sky were listening, an ice-cold beaded curtain came tumbling down as if cut from a hanging.

We reached the ledge, a very small overhang of grey rock; it only counted as shelter because of the prevailing wind. Forex folded in impressively neatly. Yuun stood at the edge of the hail fall and looked around as calmly as if the slightest change in wind wouldn't take out his exposed Gand eyes.

I took a look around, hoping for something a little less open. Nothing in immediate sight. I worked my way around a bend and found something that might suit.

"There's a crevice back here," I reported to the squad. "Don't know if it leads anywhere good, but I'll see if it gets us anything better sheltered. The rest of you,



stay out here. I don't want to miss any comms from Warden Graal and I certainly don't want to be surprised if anything else comes by." It occurred to me that I didn't have much in the way of safety features here. "Dorne, you're with me. If you've got anything that warns about gas levels out of whack, now's the time to break it out."

"Yes, sir." I pulled out a flashlight and started into the passageway, and she followed.

The passage was big enough for me to get through without much trouble, which at least meant that everyone else apart from maybe Forex could make it in. It was a couple of dozen meters before it opened into a space that felt wide. I waved my flashlight beam around a bit, but got only scattered glimpses of rocks.

"Dorne, you got anything better for light?" The sound of my voice confirmed that the cave was pretty big.

"I do, sir." In spite of the moments we had started stealing here and there, we did stay formal where anyone might hear. "One moment." I heard her opening her pack and fiddling with something, and then a hand lamp blew to bright white light. We both took a look around.

"Wow," I said.

The cave was uneven on all sides, including the floor. Some patches were the same grey stone as we had seen outside; the rest were...crystals. All shapes, all colors, shining like they weren't sure why nobody had put them in jewelry or some kind of art yet. A couple of them had patterns of dark symmetrical splotches on them. A few black puddles dotted what I could see of the floor.

Elara had already hurried to the nearest crystal formation, where she bent to not quite poke at the dark circles on it. She popped her helmet off and looked even closer. "I can't begin to guess what sort of lichen this is," she called. "If it even is lichen. I'll have to come back later. I want to take samples of everything!"

"You can do that right now," I said, slightly confused.

"Hm." She straightened and gave me a sly look. "There's a higher-priority task at the moment, Major."

“There is?”

“Very much so.” She set the lamp on the nearest rock, then walked up and, at the last second, stepped up a little ledge so she could see me almost eye to eye. I was getting used to the immediate leadup to her bypassing my hesitations, at least, so I knew enough to pull my helmet off before she did it for me.

There was less hesitation every time and yet I was never quite ready for the moment her lips touched mine. Starting out breathless was a bit of a problem, but it was clearly something I was going to have to get used to.

So I wrapped my arms around her, and kissed her, and somewhere in that soft sweet give and take she nipped my lip, a quick sharp shock. She smiled almost smugly when she felt my involuntary shiver. No woman that reserved and formal had any business doing that to a man in public. Or, maybe not ‘public’ because it was technically out of the way, but it wasn’t...the point was, she had to know what she did to me and I never wanted her to stop.

Still. I pulled away and tried to steady myself despite the fact that my heart was pounding fit to knock me over. I still knew this wasn’t a great idea. I didn’t want to get her in trouble. I wanted her, so much I could hardly think straight, but there were about a hundred ways we could go wrong before it could even go anywhere and just declining to think about it every time we got a moment alone wasn’t the way to handle it. “Elara, is the sneaking thing working for you?”

She regarded me solemnly from about three inches away. “Well, Vierce, at the moment we are exploring unfamiliar territory—” she looked around the cavern – “because there may be something here that would benefit both of us. In spite of—” she tilted her head toward the entrance and smiled a little bit – “a tumultuous start.”

So much for any desire I might have had to argue. “You’re brilliant,” I told her.

“I do my best.”

I kissed her again, as much as I thought we could get away with before the others came looking. I figured that as per my trusted lieutenant’s recommendation we’d better thoroughly verify this territory was safe before we went back out.

## 41. Belsavis: Contact

It doesn't go evenly. Some days are hard...

...and then, some other days aren't.

I found Jorgan in the holo room. He was toying with a semi-assembled cannon.

"Hey," I said. He grunted. "I ever tell you about the time Kirsk came back to Kegled II? The first time?"

He looked up at me, hands still moving. "Is that a trick question, sir?"

"No. I was just about...nineteen. He was seventeen. He'd been gone for six or seven months. His goodbye note was about ten words not about where he was going."

"So typical?"

"Yeah. So I get a text holo summoning me to the spaceport. The little one, I would've been arrested in three seconds flat in the big one. I get to the hangar, more than half expecting a trap, and instead I actually got him."

"Which was worse."

"There's an Imp customs officer pointing at the console by the door, yelling. And Kirsk is being exactly as useful as ever. He started gesturing at his new friend. 'See? Explain it to him!'"

"I didn't know what was going on but given my position stalling seemed like the only thing that wouldn't get him, me, or both arrested, so I just started berating the customs officer, praying with every insult that he would either give up or explain to me why my brother was piloting an apparently stolen yacht.

"And Kirsk, I realized, was slicing on the console the whole time."

"Was he pulling the police off your back? Because if anybody saw you..."

“That had occurred to me. Probably not him. So the customs officer is faced with newly incontrovertible evidence of Kirsk’s ownership and he storms out. And Kirsk just said ‘Miss me, big brother?’

“I told him he was changing the subject. And when he tried to argue with that I just pointed to his ship. ‘Explain this to Mama. I dare you.’”

“Did he?”

“Creatively, yes.” I scoffed. “Not really sure where I was going with that. It just came up while I was eating.” I had a past. A pretty good past, thirteen-year streak of brutal oppression excepted. I had roots, and that mattered when I started weaving in with someone else.

Several someone elses, in a way.

“Boss,” said Tanno Vik from the direction of the bridge. He was looking sort of...admiring. “So you do do creative acquisitions.”

“No. No, my brother does. I do bailing my brother out of trouble.”

M1-4X clanked out of the briefing room. “I have never been happier that the enlightenment of the Republic has saved another planet from such chaos. The thought of such a scoundrel being allowed to...”

Things were silent.

M1-4X’s eyes turned a brighter yellow. “What?”

“For what it’s worth,” I said, “he was putting one over on the Imps.”

“Oh! Carry on! Often the least conventional ally can become the most important!”

Yuun completed the scene. <Your brother is...a criminal?>

I spread my hands innocently. “Only in the jurisdictions he’s been to.”

---

Belsavis had depths I could dislike, with enemies I could fight. At least it was straightforward, and it was something before our next assignment. All the same it was a relief to return to the bunks at the slowly regenerating Republic base in minimum security.

"Sir," said Elara, "could I have a word with you on the ship?"

Our quarters on Belsavis were fairly comfortable, but I didn't ask questions. Instead I went with her.

"I've found some paperwork for the remainder of the squad to do," she said briskly. "I expect Jorgan to complete it first. Seventy minutes or so."

The number of possible reasons for doing this was...small. Had she gotten impatient with me? "And why are you saying this?"

"No reason," she said.

"Okay." She was usually up front with her plans. If she wasn't, well, she knew what she was doing. "Good work today."

She smiled. "It was. I think that was enough to let our backup secure the planet."

"One more for the Republic. One less for them."

Elara slipped her hand into mine and started strolling around the holo room. "Here we are," she said.

I followed. "Nobody to file complaints." And hesitating, "Can I take your hair down?"

"You would probably stab yourself trying." Her eyes gleamed green as she brought her hands up and started a rapid, businesslike disassembly of the bun she'd been wearing for as long as I'd known her. Businesslike was sexy on her. I guess that was not a small factor in why we were still escalating. And escalating.

I touched her hair. It was soft. "There's something you need to know," I said. I mean, apart from my being the most messed-up person on the face of the galaxy. She already knew all she needed to know about that, and the details would do me no favors.

She didn't look worried, only interested. "What is it?"

I set my hands on her waist. "There's one thing I'd change if I could."

"Oh?"

"This, us, it all happened backwards. I didn't realize until way after I got to know you, and respect you, and admire you, that it could ever be...that we could be." I studied her hair, her mouth. "I just wish I'd been paying more attention when I fell in love with you."

Her lips parted ever so slightly. She smiled when she said "You might have notified me as well, sir."

"Well." I grinned. "Consider this your formal notification, Lieutenant Dorne, that I, Major Vierce Savins, am terribly, terribly much in love with you."

"Noted, sir. I'm afraid I've misplaced the form that would ordinarily make such information a matter of record, but in light of the urgency of the information I feel obligated to bypass the memo and tell you directly that I love you, too."

"Hmm." I trailed a hand down her side, a wicked idea taking shape. "Do I have to sign an approval on that one?"

"Well, sir, confirmation is requested." She did that wonderful innocent hesitation of hers. "Since we're still lacking in the traditional paperwork...we'll have to come up with some alternate means of authentication."

"I can do that," I murmured. My hand paused on her waist. I hadn't asked for more before. "You're sure?"

The first minute or so of her answer was expressed entirely in kisses.

## 42. A-77: Justice and Necessity

"I need to pretend this didn't happen," she whispered, and giggled.

“Elara, what are we doing?”

“Sneaking,” she said firmly, and giggled again.

“I love you. And I am going to have to send you out of these quarters before the period of plausible deniability is up. Believe me when I say those orders are not in my preferred line of action.”

She kissed my shoulder and then my jaw. She didn’t avoid the scars. “I’m learning to tell the difference.”

---

We did it. And Dagger Wing wasn’t a bunch of war criminals, they had me convinced of that. They’d gotten bad orders all unknowing, and carried them out, and taken the fall. I came there to spring a unit for Garza to use. I left with people I might even consider friends.

Belsavis was a prison, and there’s something I do to prisons.

But Garza called us back before we’d done much more. I rounded up the squad and returned to the security of our ship. She was pleased with the Belsavis report. We would have Dagger Wing ready to go. Now if only I could be sure they were getting what they deserved.

“I hope you considered the evidence we gathered,” I said. “Dagger Wing deserves to have its name cleared outright.”

“Your concern is noted,” said Garza. And, briskly, “Time will tell. The question is out of our hands.”

“If it’s not in a commander of the armed forces’ hands, whose is it?”

She gave me that look. “This isn’t a simple situation, Major.”

“So where’s the pressure coming from? The Senate? The press? Look, I get it. Senators count for something. The public opinion counts for something. But there are other things you have to consider.”

“Such as?” Garza said shortly.

“Justice. The truth – I’m not even asking for the inconvenient ones. Only the ones that’ll bring innocent lives back to where they deserve to be.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”

No. Not this time. “General Garza. Sir. I’ve met people who felt like you turned your back on them. Now, some of them did stupid things in response and I’m not excusing that. But I am starting to wonder what happens when my turn comes. Some mistake. Might not even be my own.” Reflexively, protectively, I folded my arms over my chest. “You ever think you might’ve hired a spec ops team a little too good to disappear on command?”

Garza’s eyes were durasteel. “Is that a threat, Major?”

“No, sir. Just an observation. I’ll just keep doing my job, sir. You and I are loyal to the same Republic. And I get results.”

She didn’t dignify that with a response. Instead she gave us our next mission. It was an Imperial POW facility fetchingly named A-77. And somebody familiar had gotten there first to scout out the difficulties.

---

General Rakton was a pustule on the holo. I had just walked into his trap on the prisoner of war holding facility A-77, and I was ready to shoot something.

The prison station rocked and Rakton saw it. “Ah,” he said conversationally. “Imperial warships have maneuvered into position around A-77.” So much for a clean prison break. “The facility will be obliterated in a matter of minutes. Goodbye.”

He flickered away. The Mon Calamari technician who had brought me this far was gaping at the controls. “The shields are already failing! I have to reroute power...”

Ava Jaxo, the soldier who had infiltrated a few levels down to tell us about this station in the first place and call in support, crackled into play in my helmet. We hadn’t said anything personal yet. There was too much on the line. “You want to give me an update here, Major? It feels like someone’s shooting at us.”



So I gave her the update. "Imps. They're firing full rate."

Ava's voice went up a half step. "They're going to blow up their own prison? This is insane!"

No. No, it made perfect sense. You bait things with something you don't care about losing.

"I can do it!" squeaked the Mon Calamari. "I can keep the shields up! We can all make it out if I just vent the systems level."

Ava again. "You can't vent the systems level. I'm on the systems level!" I tensed, eyeing the control panel as if it had something useful to tell me. "There are droids everywhere, I'd never make it out – who is this moron?"

The thought of three hundred POWs getting free this minute forced me to go on. "Is there any other way to get the shields up, or get her out? Can we get M1-4X down there with a suit in time?"

"There is no other way," said the technician. "Please forgive me, but we have no other alternative. Without shields, we would never get the cells open fast enough. All of the prisoners would die."

I had to think and I didn't have enough time to do it in. When Ava came back her voice was low and urgent. "You've got to get me out of here, Major. I can't die in this place. I can't."

"Ava," I said, "it's hundreds of people. That you'll be rescuing." But I didn't give the order.

"There's always a choice. Please – don't do this." I hung, trapped. Ava came back, her voice tiny. "I won't call you 'farmboy' anymore."

The station rocked again. Without shields the place would be shredded in short order, and with it every POW we had come to save. All I had to do was give the order. All I had to do was nod.

“Ava,” I said. “I’m sorry.” I tapped my mic off, then changed my mind and reactivated it. She deserved to hear the order that would kill her. “Stay with me, Ava.”

“You’re not. You can’t.”

I nodded at the technician. “Vent the service level. Get the shields back and the prison cells open ASAP.”

The technician sprang to work. Ava’s breath crackled. “But...no. It can’t end like this. It can’t—”

“Ava,” I said. “I won’t forget.” But nobody answered.

Evacuation was a blur. The POWs were grateful, for whatever that was worth. Nobody else died.

We finally leaped to hyperspace away from the ruined station and its Imperial attackers. I saw that we were on track and then went to my quarters and sat down, hard.

Ava Jaxo had been the single most impulsive thing about my career. Exactly how she had talked me into her comfortably cluttered apartment on Coruscant – on more than one occasion – I couldn’t even remember. But her smoky charm was impossible to say no to. I thought I could do the impossible for that voice.

Well. Wrong, I guess.

My leaders in the resistance had sent people to their deaths before. I’d hated them for it, but those sacrifices had meaning. They’d saved lives, saved the cause. At the time I told myself that was what cleared the leaders’ consciences. It had never occurred to me that maybe those consciences *weren’t* clear.

There were things to do in the here and now. I would tell Ava’s sisters myself. What was I going to say? Great gal, wonderful sense of humor, star soldier, I personally gave the order to kill her? It’d do no one any favors, even leaving that last part out. But I had to make the effort. Too little, too late. Too damn late.

### 43. Interlude: Processing

The first knock sounded. I ignored it.

There was a faint complaining beep as the lock undid itself. Yuun stepped in.  
Damned slicers.

I couldn't tell what expression was on the Gand's face. <They instructed Yuun not to speak to you.>

"Yeah, well. I've punched pretty much everyone here when they caught me on bad days. Everyone but Dorne."

<Yuun sees your shame. When Gand are dishonored by word or deed do we not use our names. We...hide our eyes. This Gand is no one. This Gand must earn a name, or go without.> He paused, then said, defensively, <Yuun is named for becoming a Findsman.>

"We don't really have any tradition like that." Though, vanishing into humanity didn't seem like a bad idea.

<Do not you earn names with deeds, Major? Major is named for saving the Republic from a hidden weapon. This deed and many more.>

It wasn't really the same. "Yeah, well, this human just did the worst thing in his life." I could honestly say I didn't regret a single Imp killed in my old life. And I didn't now. But this..."What do you Gand do when someone you care about dies?"

<We eat three times. Once in sorrow and twice in joy, that we remember the proper proportion.>

That sounded sort of nice. "It might take me more than once."

Yuun clicked and tilted his head. <Well. You are not Gand.>

Unsolicited, all of it. "I could still punch you." But I didn't. I wasn't that person anymore. As I looked at him, the mere fact of being close enough to help was no longer an act of being close enough to get bitten. Go figure.

<You have shame. You have glimpsed the impossible and found it out of reach, and blame yourself for its remoteness.> He paused. <Nevertheless, Yuun would call you Major Savins.>

He let himself out. It was half an hour before anybody else tried.

---

A knock on the door. I leaned forward, forearms on knees, and waited for whatever it was to happen.

It was Elara. She slipped in and let the door fall shut. "Vierce?" she said. Her eyes were shadowed in the low light.

I opened my mouth and waited for words to fill in. Nothing happened. I couldn't stand her eyes on me, her of all people...the next lover, maybe, when I faced this choice again. I coughed. "I have to take this one myself," I said, not looking at her.

She took a step toward me and reached out, not quite touching. How well she knew me. "She was important to you," she said, as if that were news. I guess to her it was. Ava was before we were on speaking terms.

I grunted. "How important does someone have to be before you feel bad about spacing them?" She flinched. And I didn't want to talk about this. "So now you know what I'd do to a woman who trusts me. Still interested?"

"You're exactly the man I believe in."

"Hell if I know why. Go talk to Jorgan. Sort out our next orders. I'm sure there's something that needs our unique Havoc touch."

"I'm sorry, Vierce."

I covered my face with my hands. "So am I." Then I waited for her to leave. Sensibly, she did.

---

Some amount of time later I got hungry enough to interrupt the blame circle. I checked the time – dead of night, the crew should be asleep. Good. I headed to the mess and, not feeling up to real food, broke out a ration bar.

I heard the movement a second before the voice. “There you are.”

Jorgan. “Yeah.”

“Listen. Savins. You remember what we talked about when I found out about you and Dorne?”

“Yeah.” I turned around and shook my head, hard. “Turns out when it comes down to it I can do the right thing. Good for me, right? I should put myself in for a goddamn medal.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Talk about the mission or don’t talk,” I said.

“The mission was a success thanks to you. Not as clean as we wanted. But we did the job.”

Ava had gone out begging for her life. “I changed my mind. Just don’t talk.” I took my ration bar and went back to my quarters. Jorgan let me pass.

---

The crew gathered in the mess in the morning. Yuun was coming off watch and the other three were as well rested as anyone ever was after an active day and dead silent night.

“So is the boss going to show his face today?” said Tanno Vik.

"I don't know," said Jorgan. "He isn't taking it well."

<He made the mission a success>, said Yuun. <There should be no shame.>

"He isn't ashamed," said Dorne, frowning with her own private thoughts. "He's in pain."

"Jaxo started before your time," said Jorgan. "And she wasn't long-haul serious. But she got him to lighten up back before I thought that was possible."

"Right." Tanno Vik laughed mirthlessly. "So what does a guy do the day he finds out he can make that call?"

"Be alone," Dorne said softly. Jorgan shot her a sharp look, which she didn't meet.

<Will this shake his resolve?> said Yuun.

For a little while no one answered.

#### **44. Voss: High-Stakes Diplomacy**

Someone knocked on my door. Twice, sharply, and then again when I didn't answer.

I reached across from my bunk and flicked the release. Elara was there.

"New assignment?" I said, knowing that it wasn't.

"It's been close to forty-eight hours. Are you going to join us?"

"Yeah." In my own time.

"Have you spoken with your...doctor?"

My therapist. "Yeah." That was a lie. "Didn't do much."

She stepped in and let the door fall shut. "I'm not going to ask whether he pushed you or not. But, frankly, he may not be invested in results. I am."

"Which means?"

Elara shifted from foot to foot. "I have...few things to call my own. And before I met you I didn't mind. Now? I want more. I want whatever I can hold on to in a universe that you and I very well know offers no promises. I want you. And I will not let you withdraw where I cannot follow."

My burn scar was itching, a counterpoint to the tear tracks. "Elara. You know the last time I cried?"

"No."

"I was nineteen. A Sith had just blown through town. He'd killed three Imperial guards, which I cheered, and one old man, which I mourned. I was so...helpless. I just stopped crying when I left for Coruscant. I can't imagine Jorgan respecting a weepy commander. Any of them, for that matter." I paused. "Or you."

For answer she leaned over me and kissed my hair.

"I can't keep you safe. I don't even know if I can keep you happy. I would knock stars out of place with my bare hands if I thought it'd help. But sometimes my bare hands are doing the other thing."

"I understand that." I waited for her to keep pushing, to keep rationalizing, to keep going down roads that left me displaced and hurting with nothing to show. Only, she didn't. "I'm sorry."

"There's a story on Kegled II about a man who had the strength of a hundred in his fists. But only in his fists. He could smash, fight, break anything, but when he opened his hands to touch or hold or comfort he was just a guy."

"You have both aspects. In greater amounts than you know."

I reached up to touch her cheek. "When the punching's finished I'm just a guy. And not enough of one to save everybody."

“I love you anyway.” She sat beside me and leaned into me. I kept my arm in place. Holding her didn’t seem like the smartest measure just then.

But she was with me for a while, and a few minutes after she left I went out to face things, too.

---

The Sith wasn’t supposed to be there.

Back up. I can’t explain Voss. Not even a little bit. It was a newly discovered civilization and they had the kind of firepower that stopped an Imp invasion cold. Even the most aggressive Republic brass took notice of that. The Voss were very polite about it. On the surface they tolerated people from both sides of the fence.

Even Sith. Sith and Republic officials met in big Voss meetings in the city of Voss-Ka and didn’t even shoot at each other. I knew he knew about the stolen weapon Imps were selling to local bidders. What I didn’t know was he could get free of his Voss handlers – and our own ambassador, whatever the hell he was good for – long enough to supervise the transition himself. So we found out when we got there.

The setting was the winningly named Nightmare Lands, and a cave tunnel leading back into the mountains of Voss-Ka. We entered separately, covering one another. We stayed sharp.

The Sith they called Lod Torius could sense that.

“There you are,” he said for starters. He was standing with the packaged bomb at his back and a clear view of the hemisphere of rock around which the rest of us were creeping. “This is the vaunted commander of Havoc Squad? I can smell your terror from here.”

He probably could. I stopped creeping. Every tactical trick about Sith started with not being noticed first. “I always wanted to kill a man like you.”

“Assuming I don’t, oh, deflect your blaster bolts?” The Sith gestured negligently to redirect the blaster shot Vik had decided to take. “Turn the scenery against you?” Some rocks to one side shook and started moving. I crouched and shielded my



face; they hit with a contemptuous slap and fell. "Or are you afraid I'll...*do* things, inside your mind?"

"Nerf shit," I said, standing. I was sure he could smell my terror. May he choke on it.

"That isn't just propaganda, Commander."

"I know," I said through my teeth. We'd had some training against Force techniques, as any spec ops soldier should. Jedi came in for a few days. They'd pushed buttons I didn't know I had. Now this...person...was feeling for the same things. "It's propaganda plus this idiot belief that talent's a substitute for righteousness. Havoc, open fire."

The force grabbed my collar and jerked me off my feet, strangling on the way. I gasped and swung my blaster to bear. The Sith had one hand up, pulling the invisible rope, and one hand free. He deflected the bolts with only the barest of interest.

I was getting close. Everyone else's firing had stopped. 'Keep," I choked, and gagged. I was seeing spots when I brought up my arm to order another salvo. With or without me. They didn't obey.

"Vviiiieerrrrcccccce." The Sith's breath was rank on the scarred side of my face. "Garza's hound. She goes through them so quickly, you know."

I ignored him. "Take the shot," and my voice limped. Dammit, I sounded afraid. "Take it."

"Do shut up," said the Sith. "All of you, stop *sidling*." He shifted his grip on my neck, and while a normal person wouldn't be able to snap it from there, all bets were off for him. But while his fingertips dug into my cheek and neck he looked past me. "There we are. Letters written in flames in the sky. Lieutenant?" He pronounced it with an "f". "You're looking terribly fierce. I suppose you want this man for something more than drooling the rest of his days?"

"Let him go." That was the voice that wouldn't shoot. It'd take on hell itself, but it wouldn't risk me. "Take me if you want, to live or die, only let him go."

“Ha. Sith do not make deals with worker drones. Least of all the traitors.”

His grip tightened. Several other things happened at that moment, none of which I could appreciate (apart from the hideous screeching) when his nails pierced my skin, tightened, and let me drop.

I staggered away. The Sith had one black mark in his skull and Vik was strolling up to pull a long knife out of the back of his robes.

Jorgan saluted. “Sniper, sir.”

Yuun chirped. <Disruption, sir.>

Vik looked cheerful. “Backstabber, sir.”

Elara drew herself up straighter. “Blindly emotional, sir.” She continued briskly. “I just took all the advice I’ve been given about evading a Sith’s attention and did the opposite. Blazing hysteria seemed to pique his interest.”

And that’s all? I didn’t ask, because I shouldn’t know the answer.

M1-4X made an uncomfortable creaking noise. “This was a contingency plan not in my programming, sir. Next time I’ll deploy missiles at a fifty percent chance of hostage survival.”

“Keep it where it is,” I said. I didn’t relish the idea of adding missiles to the scene that had just played out. “Jorgan, the SOP says *regular* sniper rifle from a *safe distance*.”

“Yessir,” Jorgan said crisply, hefting his assault cannon. “It was in my other pants pocket, sir.”

“Good enough.” I ruffled my hair and looked around. We were okay. And several of us looked pretty self-satisfied. “Let’s deactivate this sucker and get going, people.”

## 45. Voss: Affirmations

The alien district where we stayed in Voss-Ka had a few sidewalk cafes, the kind of place I could take Elara as a halfway decent date instead of another camp meal. So it was there after dinner that I took out a little flat box and said “I got you something.”

She took the box and opened it to reveal the necklace inside. She deftly unwrapped its chain from its stand and examined it.

The necklace was a pendant, a four-cornered knot of twisting aurodium ribbons, with little light-catching gems nestled in some of the turns. “It’s an old Keglial symbol,” I explained. “The unbroken knot. Good for your sweetheart. I thought you might like green.”

The endless knot had a little more baggage than that. It said you were playing for keeps. I wasn’t sure I could voice that yet.

“Vierce, this is lovely. Thank you.” She put it on, settled the symbol against her skin, and smiled sweetly. “And what am I to give in return?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “The rulebook’s a little fuzzy on that anyw—”

All in one motion she scooted from her seat around to my knee and grabbed my shirt. Then and there she pulled me down to where she could kiss me, and did.

---

Leaving Voss was a great, great experience. Next time you want me to stand in a room with a Sith and not end up shooting, please skip the middle stuff and put me out of my misery first.

Elara was in my quarters. She was carrying a datapad. She looked very serious.

“I got something for us,” she said. “It took a great deal of research, and quite a few holo-calls to some very important people.” My worry mounted with every

word. "Form 3578-K officially authorizes us to pursue a mutual romantic relationship."

My worry stopped mounting. "There's a form for that?" I said blankly.

"I thought we might sign it together," she said, shy now.

"You found a form for that."

That up-and-down line between her eyebrows was too precious for words.

"Well...yes. You should know by now that I prefer to do things by the book."

"You're out of your mind." I took a step closer and kissed her, laughing a little at the way she started.

"Vierce," she half laughed herself, turning her face a little, "what are—"

"I'm kissing you while it's still a bad idea," I said. The absurdity hit just as I spoke, so I laughed and kissed her again.

"Major Savins!" she protested. "This form isn't – mm – isn't going to sign itself!" She bent back and pushed the datapad up into my chest.

"You're out of your mind," I repeated, "and I love you." Then I took the damned datapad and signed it. It really wasn't hard to make her happy. This, signing off that I wanted her and nobody else, this I could do. Let HQ chew on that. Her opinion was the only one I cared about.

Still, somebody should know. "You think this goes on the evening briefing?"

"It hardly seems relevant," she said archly. "Besides, Captain Jorgan knows. Specialist Vik must suspect."

"Yuun's got to know." The Gand didn't miss much, and after what he'd said to me it seemed like alien didn't mean clueless about relationships.

"That leaves Forex," I said.

"I'm not sure his programming extends that far."

I poked my head out of the room and yelled. "Hey, Forex?"

He answered at once. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm seeing Lieutenant Dorne!"

She nudged my arm. "Vierce!"

"This is a great day for the Republic?" yelled Forex.

"Damn straight."

---

It was Elara's quarters and we were sleeping, for the first time. Life was perfect.

Then I woke up. It was dark. I was cold, naked. The smell in the air was sweat and a faint tang of plasma fire, distant. I didn't know this place. Someone was there in the dark.

I reached for a weapon and it wasn't there.

I tensed head to foot and pounced free of the sheets' confines and turned at bay in the corner of the tiny room. One whole half of my body shuddered while I felt around for something, anything, a light or a heavy object, I didn't care which.

The person still in the bed stirred. "Vierce?" murmured Elara.

Oh. The fear died down, leaving thick eddies in its wake. I coughed weakly. I had no explanation but that there was a threat nearby and I'd wanted to do harm to it.

"What's wrong?" She was sitting up.

"Relax," I said. "It's okay." I started flailing for my clothes. I wanted something certain when I woke up again, and a person was a little too uncontrolled to count on. Gingerly I returned to the bunk. It was barely big enough for me, must less me and Elara, but she didn't seem to mind sharing.

"I love you," I whispered.

"That's not a substitute for talking," she murmured. "Your heart's pounding."

"In the morning." I nuzzled her neck. Her smell was new, something that belonged to no nightmare. It helped. "Please."

She remembered in the morning, which was inconvenient for me. She was pulling on her undershirt, a sight I would never tire of, when she said "What happened last night? One moment I was sleeping and the next you were across the room."

"I need to ask you something."

"Of course. What is it?"

"You still have the holofrequency for that...that therapist you wanted me to talk to?"

"But I thought you've been..." She trailed off. "You haven't been, all this time."

"I did two sessions. I didn't want to play. Decided that was enough. But it's different now."

In the darkness I couldn't see the disappointment I was hearing. "Why?"

"If it were just me I'd still be ignoring it." Her look was questioning. I took a deep breath. "It's you. Staying the night, together. It's...it's been a long time since I stayed. With anyone." Jaxo had had the decency to be on the far side of the bed when I woke up. I tried to fit words together for a minute. "If I...dream, it's not because of you."

"I know that," she said.

I took her hands. They were so warm in mine. Square and strong, callused. Beautiful, like everything about her. I took her hands and decided that for her I could admit it: I was scared. "If I'm seeing something, remembering. When I wake up." I looked at our hands. I looked at her face. She should never have to dodge. "It's not your fault."

"Vierce," she whispered, and squeezed my hands. "I do trust you."

I wrapped my arms around her, loose enough not to trap. I shouldn't have worried; she leaned into me anyway. So I held her, drawing my steadiness from hers. "I mean to live up to that trust," I said. "Whatever it takes."

For her? Whatever it takes.

#### 46. Interlude: Personnel Hearings

"Vierce Savins. Major, Havoc Squad. Serial number 19-026."

"Yes, I remember our prior meetings." The therapist gave an insincere smile and folded his hands behind his back in a civilian corruption of parade rest. "It's good to see you. What convinced you to come back?"

"Fifty-fifty, doctor. Part to impress a girl. And part because I'm going to get my ass kicked if I keep acting on instinct." Rough but true.

"It's a start. Have a seat." The holo shifted while the man took his own advice. "You seem pretty self-aware, which tells me there are specific areas you're concerned about today. Where do you want to start?"

With everything? I wasn't sure. But I hadn't been lying about either side of that equation, so here it was.

---

"So?"

Elara looked up from her tinkering. "So, sir?"

"Your mystery errand to Coruscant. Everything okay?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Do I get to find out what you were doing?"

"I didn't want to bother you, sir."

"Oh." She seemed happy to leave it there. "Okay." I walked out.

"Vierce, wait."

I let out a breath and leaned back. "Want to talk?"

"It's nothing bad, I promise." She gestured. I followed her back into the medbay.

"It's Captain Kalor," she said. "He got me re-classified as a 'person of concern.'"

"What? Why didn't you say something?"

"I have materials, records, recordings, proof of everything he has done to obfuscate and delay. Thousands of credits wasted simply to discredit me. Putting it all together at the hearing was...an experience."

"But Personnel Division? Do they realize what a nutcase they have on their hands?"

"I think so. They seemed sympathetic." Her lashes fluttered a few times, gold dust and all. "I don't know whether it will come to anything. But I had to try."

"They'll come around. If there's anything I can do..."

"Be patient." She dimpled. "Sorry."

---

The consultations, whatever you call them, they were on my personal holo in my locked quarters while Elara ran interference. I didn't want to have to involve her at all, but she insisted she could get the crew off my back for the hours here and there that I took, and I didn't have the heart to tell her no.

He was Human, lean, scholarly-looking, with a datapad that he referred to frequently. My life's story as told my the official record, I was sure. Well, he never ran away screaming no matter what he saw on there, so maybe this was going to work out.



“So when you were, just a child, and they handed you a blaster. That must’ve solved a lot of problems for you.”

I took him at his word. “In a way it did.”

“And you’ve always had a blaster since then.”

“Always needed one, doc.”

“What does the rest of your toolbox look like? How does Major Vierce Savins solve problems he can’t shoot?”

“Badly.”

“Do you think it would be useful to evaluate some other techniques? For deployment only when called for, of course. Shooting things with the blaster you picked up when you were seven-”

“Eleven.” That was the first time I’d pointed at more than a practice target. It seemed important to say I hadn’t killed anyone when I was seven. When would Elara hear that distinction? Not yet. Boy, not yet.

“Eleven. Fifteen years? That’s a long time to rely on one sidearm.”

I thought about it. Fifteen years; soldiers had honorable retirement after stints that long. “You’re not wrong.”

---

Elara sat at the little angled mirror in our quarters, coiling the gold waves of her hair into the bun she always kept it in. The finishing was done with a lot of pins and some kind of gooey stuff. I watched her and her reflection and admired the locks that managed to escape her hands to fall free for a moment here and there.

She caught my eye in the mirror. “Vierce? There’s something on your mind.”

“I was just thinking about undoing all your hard work.”

“We have a day to get through first, sir,” she said primly.

“Sure. I just like to have something to look forward to.”

She paused her work for a second and smiled. “I suppose that makes two of us.”

## 47. Corellia: The Bastion

Corellia was the hellscape I had always feared in Kegled. Torn up by bombing, scarred by industry forced to grow too fast, scattered with banners scored with debris, cratered with construction yards that couldn't develop as fast as they could be knocked down. It wasn't my heart but it still hurt to see.

But Corellia had the prize. Corellia had General Rakton, the personal architect of more Imperial abominations than I cared to name. I could if you asked me; I follow the news. But it wasn't fun.

Garza had an opinionated civ dealing with the dropships that would place Garza's forces on the board. I just ran around enabling people: pilots behind forcefields, locals straddling the chokepoint for the passage of Imperial troops. People listened to me. Garza's hand was at the wheel but I was the one people recognized. For once I didn't mind being that conspicuous. This planet was split between collaborators and people who wanted to see Corellia free again, and that's the kind of divide I'm used to.

Sadly enough.

Our objective was the Bastion, a fortress and logistical center that the Corellian collaborators had all but handed to the Empire under a little pressure from what passed for a spec ops team Imp-side. Part of me hoped they were still there.

Collaborators. This planet's government could burn, for all I cared.

The Bastion was to be a joint exercise. Havoc Squad commanding and coordinating, our old friends the Safecrackers, an armored division that dressed like trees or something, and me. Garza laid it all out clear.

Well, mostly clear.

"You want me to take an Imp crawler and...not destroy it."

"A captured Imperial crawler won't get you in the gate if it's in pieces."

"Sir."

"Yes?"

"We have the Safecrackers, right? The guys we freed on Quesh?"

"Yes."

"Their entire reason for existence is opening doors, right?"

"I don't see where you're going with this. You need to use the crawler to take the gate down."

"While making them sit and watch, sir?"

"The Bastion is out of their league. You're going to bring it into their league. In pieces, if necessary."

I sighed and gave up. "Yes, sir."

"I realize the situation on Corellia hits very close to home. So I want to be extremely clear. You aren't here to lead a gallant charge. You're here to win."

"Sir. Always." I let the holo go. "Jorgan and Forex, once we're inside the compound, cover the Safecrackers. Vik and Yuun, show our armored infantry how to deal with mechanical systems. Dorne, you're with me."

We had to split down the Bastion's approaches. The only military maneuver less likely to succeed than a two-pronged simultaneous offensive is a three-pronged simultaneous offensive, but all of us were ready to face this, and when myself and the cream of the Corellian resistance made it to the central bunker we weren't even winded yet. Yuun and the Safecrackers got to work opening that final objective. According to all intel General Rakton was in there.

He had some things to answer for.

When the first breach opened up we let our walkers gun down everything that tried to step out. Our sappers efficiently rigged the remainder of the corridor and wiped out the next wave.

Then Havoc moved in.

The guards inside were enthusiastic but few. I shot everything that moved until I reached a wide room with a huge tactical screen. Facing it stood the man who had taunted me on the A-77 station. The one responsible for a huge sweep of destruction. Rakton.

He was flanked by two guards who had their rifles up, looking at us. Nobody fired.

I stopped. I took a note of here, now, this. It didn't leave me as calm as the doctor had suggested. But it was something. Rakton was in my reach, and that made life okay.

He spoke in the Kaasian accent that very few people could render tolerable. He wasn't one of them. "The one worthy opponent in the entire Republic. Ironically outmaneuvering all of my plans to save the Republic's people. Can you not see your corrupt and weak-minded leaders are dragging you down? Your Republic will fall by the hands of the Empire or by the weight of its own decadence." He turned around to face us. "The end is inevitable. Why prolong the suffering?"

I looked at him. I didn't move. "Kill his guards," I said.

Scant seconds later that was over. Rakton had his eyes on me. "You delude yourself by supporting the Republic," he said. "Like so many others, you're willing to accept the lies of men weaker than you. The people of the Republic are crushed by bureaucracy, neither encouraged nor allowed to reach their fullest potential. Under Imperial rule, your people will be free to excel, to take charge of their own fates. I will give your people the future they deserve."

I walked up, slowly. Rakton stood stone still. I backhanded him once, not hard, testing. He took the blow with his hands at his sides. He looked at me like he wasn't afraid. He didn't even have the decency to fear death come walking.

"You think I'd be better off with the Empire?" I said.

"You know it to be true."

"Me and all the allies I've brought this far?"

"I can only begin to describe the benefits that the confidence of the Empire would grant all of you."

This time when I backhanded him I meant it. "*Don't you ever tell me about the benefits of Imperial chains,*" I roared, and gripped his shoulders, shaking. When I snapped I snapped hard. "*Which of your family died by the law of the Sith and the law of the people too obedient to blink an eye? Which loved ones? Which of your cities were razed, which planets were crushed?* Don't tell me about Imperial freedom! Don't tell me about Imperial potential! You know what I demand before I hand my world over? *Do you? I want my father back!*" I let go one hand and wiped my mouth. I was shaking, dizzy. I had never felt more right anywhere. "Then I'll listen to what you have to say about the Empire's merit." I threw him at the ground. He twisted, trying to free the rifle on his back. "No, no. Get up. Get up and fight."

Rakton spent a few moments on his hands and knees, heaving. Then he stood. I uppercut his jaw and he reeled. I grabbed him back, stomped the inside of his boot, and shoved him back down. "Show me how brave you are, Imperial warrior. Get up."

Blood was trickling out of his mouth. He stood again. His eyes were blazing, and I was 100% sure it wasn't all determination. The fear steadied me. I grabbed his thick tunic and twisted a grip under his chin, lifting a little. "Dorne?"

She stepped into the edge of my vision. "Sir?"

"What rights does he have?"

The room got very, very quiet.

"Sir?"

I'd said my piece. If he died here nothing was resolved. If he died here history didn't change. If he died here it'd be just one more kill from my endless stream, not even a pause for breath, and that was a waste of stakes that other people

held to get justice out of his hide. “We’ve captured the son of a bitch. What rights does he have?”

Elara took it pretty well. “Humane treatment, legal representation for the duration of the conflict. The ability to inform his contact of choice of his capture.”

“How humane is humane?”

She looked prim, even if she was glowing around the edges. “Sir.”

“Just asking. Somebody got cuffs? Rope? We’re bringing this guy in.”

“Uh,” said Jorgan. “Why?” The prevailing hum seemed to back the question up, even if nobody else spoke.

“He owes me for a few things,” I said. “He can pay me back by dying where the galaxy can see.”

Rakton took a labored breath. “Is that it? Take the last civilized man in society and parade him in front of the ignorant masses?”

“Not parade. Shoot. I realize the Imperial thesaurus is a little out of touch with reality, but even you should be able to tell the difference there.” I dropped him.

“Chin up,” I said. “We’re going to the brand new Republic ops center in the Bastion. Then you’re getting a flight to Coruscant. Just think, you’ll be the first Imp to die there in twelve years. Historic, that.”

#### **48. Corellia: Delivery**

I fully intended to get Rakton back to Coruscant ASAP, but the chance to take out a member of the Dark Council was too good to pass up. With an alliance of the Republic-sympathetic Corsec, local privateers, and one or two of an order called Green Jedi, we cornered the one they called Darth Hadra and wiped her out.

Somehow I ended up back at the ship. “Feel that, Rakton?”

Rakton was bound in the brig. Elara had tended to his wounds, thoroughly, because she was a better person than I am. "What game is this, soldier?"

"You're down one-twelfth of a Dark Council. And there's another one in town. Do you mourn these people when they get themselves killed? State funeral? Day of remembrance?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Oh. I imagine that happens too often around Dromund Kaas. Society would be paralyzed, if you cared about every death."

Rakton studied me. "I misjudged you, Major."

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"I thought you could be approached as a man of reason. Instead, you are a man of conviction." He gave the hard edges of each word no mercy. "And never the twain shall meet."

"Is this what Imp begging is like? I never let one live long enough to find out." I looked around the cell. "Except once. Once, I brought an Imp into this very brig. He was a recent defector from the Republic."

Rakton's eyes widened. "Havoc."

"He'd been listening to Imp stories. You seduced him. You or someone completely interchangeable with you, the details don't interest me. He believed he could belong with the Empire."

"Did you give him a trial, too?"

"Why, yes. Yes I did." As far as I knew Fuse was still sitting in a jail cell on Coruscant, and would be for a long time. "They went easy on him because he was young, because he'd been pressured. He was just a kid with the kinds of dreams kids have before it's beaten out of them. I don't think you'll stand up so well under testimony."

"I regret nothing I might have to talk about."

“Yes. That’s going to count against you.”

“How righteous of you.” He scowled. “Is there a moment you spend not playing the noble hero of the Republic?”

I walked up. I eyed the wrist restraints, then the man. I ran a hand to the blaster at my side. “Never ask me that.”

---

Havoc brought Rakton to Coruscant personally. I spent the trip trying to think to what to say to Garza, but it sounded like she didn’t need any counterpoint to her monologue when we made it to the Senate plaza. Excellent work, above and beyond, rose to the occasion, on and on. She was standing beside an aide who was tapping furiously on a datapad. The General seemed unconcerned with the activity.

“An excellent, if unexpected, job. Imperial High Command is already aware of the capture and we’re working to negotiate terms.”

“Terms, sir? He’s going on trial.”

“He’s going to buy back three thousand of our POWs. Not even you can argue that math, Major.”

“Can and will. He’s going on trial for war crimes. Starting with the A-77 station.”

Garza’s aide looked up. “Nobody died on the A-77 station.”

My jaw clenched up hard. “One did. And he’s going to answer.”

Garza’s lips thinned. “And while he’s answering, how do you propose to regain our other POWs?”

“Well, you do have a crack spec ops team here.”

“I’ll take it under advisement.”



“General. If I have ever, in all of this, earned the slightest favor from you. Make it this one. Put that man on trial. And let him die in the sight of the galaxy for what he’s done.”

“Is that why you saved him?”

“Look at my profile. Can you imagine any other reason would keep me from taking him down?”

“My thoughts exactly,” she said flatly. “Very well. We’ll take him into custody.”

#### **49. Corellia: Decorations**

“You look dashing,” said Elara. That million-watt smile was for once not shaded down to professional levels. I think it brightened the rest of us, too.

“They should’ve given me a bigger medal,” said Vik.

I looked over. “Isn’t the Silver Crescent the second highest honor in the Republic?”

“Yeah, but. Look at Yuun. That thing takes up half his chest. Put it on me, it’s the size of my nipple and harder to spot. Ergo. I deserve a bigger medal.”

“So you can get a better price on the black market for it?” said Jorgan.

“Black market? I could put it on the open Holonet. No one cares.”

Forex clacked. “Such cavalier treatment of the great honor of our grateful Republic is nothing short of sickening!”

“No. No, getting a tiny crescent is sickening. When they bolted on yours it looked like a misaligned screw head.”

“I will file down an entire strut to accommodate future decorations awarded by the Republic!”

<What celebrations follow?> said Yuun. <Or do we continue as before?>

"We get some time before the next crisis," said Jorgan. "Probably not a ticker-tape parade, but a little appreciation."

"I know at least six places within a half klick of here where we could find a party," said Vik. "Some of said partiers might even remember our names when it's done."

"I'm going to see my girl," said Jorgan. "This has been a hell of a scheduling tangle the last couple of months."

"I'm going home," I said. I looked at Elara. "Think it's about time."

---

He called me when I was on my way to the base nearest the Senate plaza. I was going to get my own room this time, probably even big enough for two. Not the primary perk, but it was nice.

"Vierce!"

"Kirsk."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what?"

"Playing innocent?"

"I'm sorry, did we fall into an alternate dimension where you're the one asking me these things?"

"Pretty much. Vierce, it's in every holovid on the 'Net. Imperial mastermind on trial for crimes against sentience. Captured on Corellia just about when you were there."

"Who said I was on Corellia?"

"I'm not authorized to say." He stuck out his tongue.

“Kirsk, if you are tracking my ship we are *going* to have a problem.”

“Nothing so criminally traceable. Relax. Forget about it. Let’s talk about the Imp. The only thing surprising to me is that he’s still alive.”

“Trial for war crimes. Seemed like a good idea.”

“Very grownup. Brother, you have...” He sucked a breath between his teeth.

“Forget it. You okay?”

I stopped myself smiling when I realized I was doing it. “You have no idea.”

“So tell me about it. You’ve been riding far afield, man. We need to have dinner. We need to have a week-long camping trip and talk about guy stuff.”

“You hate camping.”

“Depends on the company. You know that.”

“I’m not an attractive young woman. My point stands.” He made a face at me. I relented. “I might have a few days off soon. You going to be on Kegled?”

“I have a few trifling matters of paperwork to resolve here before they let me...uh...forget it. Give it a few days. I’ll be there.” He squinted. He grinned. “That medal is tiny.”

## **50. Kegled II: Back to the Beginning**

The year was 6 ATC, and no Imperial would ever set foot on Kegled II again.

The Ridgeside Core was stuffed into Kirsk’s weatherbeaten little vessel. Flash and I flanked Kirsk at the controls. I leaned over Kirsk’s chair. “Turn back a second.”

Kirsk shot me a look, bordering on a Look. “What? Why?”

“Just one more flyover.”

“Fuel ain’t free, big brother.”

“Just do it.”

“And get hit by fireworks?” He gestured at the unquiet night sky over the celebrating city.

“Do I have to take the helm myself?”

Kirsk slouched. “No. Bully.”

“I could start bullying you.”

“Not necessary.” He turned around.

I straightened and stepped toward the viewport. There it was. My life to date, its veins flowing out from the bright center of the spaceport. Or flowing toward.

Flash walked up alongside. “You know where we’re going it’s all training for a while. It won’t be fighting 24/7.”

“Yeah.”

“Feels like I hardly got to know the city since I came here.”

“Yeah.”

“Pretty.”

“Yeah.” I looked and looked. Here was home. What I’d fought and bled for. Here was what I would always be carrying in my pocket. Some people say no looking back. I don’t understand that at all. I don’t forget.

“Vierce,” said Kirsk as the ship swooped and climbed, “you fall in love with the darnedest things.”

~~~~~

7 years later...

“Now that we’ve got a couple of days free, I’d like you to meet Mama,” I said.

Elara smiled. "I did, once. Do you remember? While you were recovering on Coruscant."

"Right." Their mystery conversation before I interrupted them by waking up. "Just how long did you two have to talk to each other, anyway?"

"Several hours over a few days. She went for supper with the squad one night."

"I guess I should be relieved."

"I thought she was perfectly nice."

"She had nothing but good things to say about you." What little Mama had said when I asked, anyway; mostly she'd smirked in a knowing kind of way. "I'd like you to come home, to Kegled. I know she'd be glad to have you."

I dropped the rest of the squad off at the District B base on Coruscant for, as Elara helpfully recited, Section Eighteen R&R. They could arrange their own rides home from Coruscant. Me, I was going to Kegled II. And so was Elara.

"I'd like to stop by the Galactic Market first," she said once we had the ship to ourselves. "I have some things to pick up."

"You've got nothing to worry about," I said. "If it's clothes, I'll be wearing fatigues. They'll be fine with you doing the same."

Elara smiled a smile I couldn't quite get a bead on. "Still. Is there any sort of thing your mother likes to have around the house? Decorations, or some edible trifle?"

"Uh...she likes candleglows, I guess. None of the ones with real fire, but the electrics. You don't have to bring anything, Elara, she'll be delighted just to have you."

Elara gave that little smile again. "Understood, sir."

She only took a couple of hours out and about on Coruscant before she got back to the ship. After that I set course and took us into hyperspace.

I wore my fatigues and kept my bag at my side while I guided the Thunderclap into West Ford City's spaceport. I didn't know the voices in traffic control these days, but that was all right. I was still coming home.

I swept up my bag and headed for the holo room. It was empty. "Elara?"

There was a little thump from the direction of her quarters, then silence for a few seconds, then her regular steady step.

And then she was in the holo room, with me. She was wearing a dress. I'd never seen her like that. Blue skirt skimming her hips, falling a little past her knees. Just enough heel to shape her legs. A round neck, modest as you please, but showing the hollow of her collarbone. Short sleeves, her arms strong and graceful beyond them.

She smiled up at me in that way she had when she was really pleased. "It isn't too much, is it?" she asked.

I wanted to forget our schedule and sweep her up then and there. "Elara, you're perfect. – I mean, that's fine." I cleared my throat. "That's perfectly fine."

We rented a speeder at the spaceport and I drove along the familiar ways. It was a nice day, sunny and mild, and the bustle of the city was contented. Traffic at street level wasn't bad, so the journey to the little house went quick.

Mama and Glend greeted us at the door. Glend, touched by age but with an air of sturdiness about him, greeted me with a firm handshake; Mama got a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and then she stepped past me to clasp Elara's hands in both of her own.

"It's wonderful to see you again," said Mama, smiling ear to ear.

"I'm glad to see you as well, Mrs. Savins."

Mama stepped aside to let Glend offer a handshake. "Miss – Lieutenant Dorne. Pleasure to meet you."

Somewhere in the introductions Elara offered a little candleglow, shaped as a series of gold crystals. Mama exclaimed over it and, once we got inside, hurried to place it as a centerpiece to the table.

Both Elara and I offered to help in the kitchen; Mama shooed us both to our seats and bustled off alone. Someday I might get used to the guest treatment, but I wasn't quite there yet. Still, I sat like she told me to and spoke with Glend about the city, and then a bit about Havoc Squad, the things Mama already knew that Elara and I could fill in for Glend's benefit.

Once dinner was served we flipped back and forth between Army chatter and more talk of the city, its big events and recent changes. Elara followed along with genuine interest. And then, eventually, Glend got around to saying "Now, Sergeant Dorne, do you mind me asking where you're originally from?"

I could tell Mama was looking worriedly in my direction, but I kept my attention on Elara. She had earned this moment and the confidence she had through it. That was enough for me.

"I'm from Kaas City, on Dromund Kaas," she said calmly. "I lived there all my life until the time came for military service."

He was thoughtful for a moment, clearly realizing the wobbly course he was on and trying to think up a lead that wouldn't offend anybody. "I suppose it was Coruscant you came to after?"

"That's correct. I lived there for two years in their orientation program prior to moving out to the field."

"It must have been an experience. Do you have a favorite of the Republic worlds you've seen?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Of the planets with a standing government to call itself Republic? Coruscant, definitely. It's a beautiful planet, and the complexity of operations to support its populace is awe-inspiring."

He raised his bushy eyebrows ever so slightly. "You say 'standing government' like you've got favorite planets that don't have one."

“Well.” She blushed. “I was thinking of Taris. That’s where Vierce and I met.”

“I hated Taris,” I volunteered. “Of course, at the time I didn’t know what I had.”

Glend gave me a significant look. “Seems like we’re always the last to know, eh?”

I raised a sympathetic glass to that. Glend met the toast; Mama and Elara just smiled.

“By the way,” I added, “I liked Balmorra a little better.” That was where I’d started getting my act together. When I started listening enough for Elara to talk some sense into me.

Her smile deepened. “Balmorra did have its advantages.”

It went on, easily, naturally. I talked some and I listened more. There’s an elegance to her. Always was, though it could be easy to ignore when we were under fire all the time. Here on a world at peace she shone. I started supper thinking about what Mama would think of a woman like Elara; I ended it wondering why a woman like Elara thought so much of me.

Elara’s holo went off in her handbag by the door. Inwardly cringing, she ignored it. It went off again. Elara frowned. “Would you excuse me?”

“Please,” said Mrs. Savins. She had the same twang in her voice that Vierce did, in about the same measure. Kirsk must have worked to scrub it from his voice. Mrs. Savins gestured, looking unannoyed. Elara hurried.

It wasn’t Captain Kalor waiting, but the insignia on the stranger’s sleeve was enough. “It’s Personnel Division,” she said, heart sinking. “Just a moment.” She stepped into the den.

“Yes? What is it?” What was wrong now?

The Personnel Division officer said something. Elara temporarily forgot how to talk.

She stayed very still.

He said it again. And, “Elara?”

“I understand,” she said weakly. “Thank you.”

Voices were running in the other room. Elara tucked her holo against her waist, inactive, and looked at the wall.

Vierce filled the doorway, looking worried. “Vierce,” she said.

“What’s wrong?” he said gently. Gently, but with the suggestion of great force at the ready.

She shook her head and smiled shakily. “It’s been approved. I just countersigned the final form. I am a citizen of the Republic.”

He stepped in, quick and certain, and wrapped her in his arms, lifting ever so slightly. “That’s great. That’s perfect.” His smile renewed like the lapping of the tide. “Congratulations.”

She squeezed back. “I was starting to think they never would...”

He kissed her forehead. “Can we tell everybody? Right now?”

She laughed. “Let’s go back, at least.”

He kept his arm around her waist. Mrs. Savins and Glend looked curious but not worried. Vierce talked too loud and it was welcome. “May I introduce,” he said, and looked down to her.

He let her step into it. He let her take it on her own terms, in total safety. She stood neatly upright. “The Republic’s newest citizen. For at least a few seconds, probably.”

Mrs. Savins’ eyes went round. She stood up and gave a smile too complete to be strained. “Lieutenant, congratulations. You know all three of us—” she gestured – “got it six and a half years ago, and it was cause for celebration then, too. You are so welcome.”

Glend nodded. “All this is yours,” he said, and nobody told him no.

She had saved her share of planets since joining Havoc. This was the first one to seriously request her presence after. It felt good.

After supper Mama shooed me away from clearing the table; again, she'd been doing that ever since I moved out. Anyway, conversation rolled along for some time before I started to run down.

When I mentioned sleep Mama said "Of course. The guest room is yours, and your old room's free if need be – though the bed there hasn't gotten any bigger."

I hadn't fit comfortably on my old bed for years; sometimes I wondered why she kept Kirsk's and my old room like it was at all. It didn't have to matter today. The guest room would do fine. The notion of sharing it was new, but it was right. "Thanks." I took my bag and gestured to direct Elara to the guest room, then followed her in.

She pulled a clip out and shook her hair free, beaming at me all the while. "Your family is wonderful," she said.

"And they like you." I shut the door and walked over to touch the curve of her face, marveling that she was here in my home, the center of my memories. Here and happy. "I shouldn't have gotten nervous."

"Will you show me around the city tomorrow?"

"I'd love to. It'll be good to check up on things."

"Then it's a plan."

"All right then."

We sat in easy silence for a little while. When she spoke again her voice was gentle but serious. "Vierce."

"Elara?"

“I...after I left the Empire, I never thought I would be welcomed into a home again. I never expected...” She took a deep breath and leaned into me. “Thank you,” she said softly, “for letting me into your life.”

I pressed my nose to her hair. The smell of our standard-issue soap mixed with something about her, that something I loved. “I can’t imagine not having you here.”

She turned her face up to mine and kissed me, her mouth full and tender, her tears giving way before my lightest touch. She belonged here, in my arms, and I in hers. I would give anything for her to know it too. I think she did.

“I guess there are happy endings after all.” I’d always wondered.

“This isn’t an ending,” she said softly.

“There’s a little baggage I don’t think I’ll be carrying again.” I squeezed her. “Do you like the place?”

“It’s wonderful.”

“Good,” I said. “Welcome home.”

--end of Part III--

Appendix A. Unsorted Scenes

Five Facts

- 1) Vierce hates snakes. He considers this the one downside of his neighborhood on the outskirts of West Ford City: snakes hide in the gardens. Little evil beady-eyed snakes. They are exempt from all “be nice to small animals” principles. (Kirk thinks this is hilarious and is adept at

picking snakes up such that they can't bite him or anybody, then menacing Vierce with them.)

- 2) Vierce suggested Jorgan for maid of honor at his and Elara's wedding with a straight face. What? Best man's already taken by Kirsk. Even if he is a jerk.
- 3) Vierce is a mishmash of the boys from my hometown, several of whom did grow up to join the military. There was a lot less in the way of Imperial storm troopers in my actual hometown, I'm happy to say.
- 4) In canon, Vierce only caught Kirsk tampering with M1-4X once. Vierce caught him and physically hauled him to the brig for a cooling-off period. Kirsk whined a lot but didn't get out 'til supper time. (And 'til after he made a sworn statement that he hadn't saved any changes on Forex. And 'til after Yuun verified this by inspection. Then, then Kirsk got let out.)
- 5) Vierce is a hereditary Nikto Fever Huttball fan, his father having been crazy about them too. It's one of the few holo broadcasts he ever bothers with.

Prompt: Vices and virtues

1 ATC: Pride (Rizz)

Vierce is 14.

The day Rizz came up to practice after his shift at the shop floor we knew something was off. It's the shading between quiet-sullen and quiet-mad-sullen. You learn these things if you're around Rizz enough.

Anyway, he set up the blasters; the group – Lydian, Eddy, Vrenda, Dep, Totten, and me – set up the range to learn, and he brought the weaponry. I took target-holo operation, or prepped to, when Dep spoke up.

"Exam for the walker tech certification today, right?"

"Yesterday," corrected Rizz.

"You living the I'm-too-good-to-practice finals-acing dream?"

"Nah," said Rizz.

We all knew he'd been blowing off a ton of the prep work that should've gone into his tech certification. He didn't need it, we figured. That was Rizz's thing. I never saw him put work into anything that wasn't teaching us or running errands

for his father. Everything else just came easy and he leaned on that. But losing this cert, that put a block on things he really wanted to do. That was a loss.

"There's still other ways you can help out," said Totten.

"Yeah." Rizz ground his teeth, but he shrugged. "I can still shoot."

2 ATC: Faith/Wisdom (Vrenda/Totten)

Vierce is 15.

The first Republic landing was a disaster. They were sending in contractors, basically, anybody who wouldn't be linked back to them as treaty violations. Well, those fine contractors landed in such a way as to bring attention right to one of our operations and the whole thing was crushed.

"These people are useless," I said over a group supper. "They're in it for one thing. If they don't get us all killed first they're just going to put another master in place."

"They've let other planets keep independence," said Vrenda. "The Republic is nothing but good news for people like us."

"Tell that to Red Flats."

"It was bad," said Totten. "But they're trying. We should give them that chance."

"They'll come through for us," said Vrenda. "As they have in other systems. We have a better chance now than ever."

I scoffed. "I don't think so."

"It's been eight years," Dep said. He wasn't his usual loudmouth self; he'd been pretty shaken by the whole thing. Eddy, cuddly creature that she was, had snuggled up on his arm for the night. She was quiet too. "You really think we're going to do this without help?" said Dep.

"Taking help would just be switching masters. We push through on our own."

"We can't," said Totten. "You've got to do what you can with what you have. Sometimes you can't make more, so you don't turn down what's offered."

"Wrong," I said. "If you can't make more you take more from those who aren't using it right. We need resources we've got plenty of Imps to take 'em from, and the Imp stuff doesn't come with strings attached. I'm not going to wait for us and our questionable friends to 'do what we can.' You do what you have to."

"You do what you can," Totten repeated calmly. "And you work on surviving. We'll watch for our chance and we will make it better."

"We will," agreed Vrenda. "With each other and the friends we can find. We're in the right. All we have to do now is convince reality of that."

3 ATC: Lust/Wrath (Dep/Vierce)

Vierce is 16. This was before he dated Illyris.

I opened the conversation with a right cross.

Dep spun almost full around. At eighteen he was taller than the average guy and built enough, I guess, but at sixteen and not quite finished growing I was already big enough to take him out if I had a mind to. And I had a mind to.

"Stars, Vierce, the hell was that for?" Dep gingerly touched his cheek with one hand and reflexively smoothed his overgelled black hair with the other.

"You talked to Lyr at all today? Or are you already done with her?"

"She's just avoiding me, okay? I didn't do anything."

"Yeah. Right. She couldn't even talk when I ran into her, she was so choked up.

Now I don't want your details and I'm not asking her. All I know is I kept my mouth shut while you were verbally working her over all this time, ever since she came to town, and I stayed quiet when you started bragging behind her back. But enough is enough."

Dep was recovering, at least a little. "Well aren't you just the police of the world," he sneered. "I didn't do anything she wasn't asking for, so back off."

"I'll back off when you stop making my friend cry. You're a friend, too, Dep, but sometimes you're a complete pig."

"I didn't do anything," he repeated. "You really think I would hurt her?"

"There's one or two things you're not known for restraint about," I said.

"It was nothing she didn't ask for herself," he insisted.

"That's good. That's good to know. Because if anything – *anything* – makes her cry again, I'll take that as you asking for a broken leg or two."

"Right," said Dep. "You know, Vierce, sometimes you're a real psychopath. Would you please just find a girl to work out your obvious frustrations on, and leave the rest of us alone?"

"Some of us stay decent people even after they know a girl."

"Yeah, and some of us don't get violent every time somebody starts sniffing."

Dep touched his cheek again. "Seriously. Get a hobby. I hear Eddy's got no one better to do these days."

I hit him again. I like the guy, I do, but sometimes...sometimes he needs the kind of reality check that the girls he picks flat-out don't have the muscle to give him.

4 ATC: Envy/Greed (Eddy/Vrenda)

Vierce is 17.

We were at the pool tables at one of the cheaper downtown places, all of us but Illyris, who had to study. We were just hanging out, talking. I had to stay off the streets by then, but a hood and a very good knowledge of how to move let me go to in-town destinations from time to time.

Vrenda was holding forth on the difficulties of programming, her day job. It's only slicing if you're not supposed to do it. She was a slicer for us. Well, she talked about her job, and Dep and Kirsik did that silly rivalry thing they always did for a girl that would never look at them like that but they still sniped at each other out of habit, and that's how it went.

I remember Eddy was noisy that evening. I mean, she always is, but almost annoyingly so. Vrenda would smile her catlike smile and bring the conversation right back to work. She always kept this stuff interesting. I don't think I would've noticed anything special about it.

But finally Eddy snapped "It's great your little office drama is the center of the galaxy, but I've got stuff elsewhere." She cast a venomous look around at the Vrenda and the boys, and then she stomped out.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Vrenda broke it saying "I love her, but she can be such a child sometimes."

"She's the youngest. I think she just feels ignored," said Totten.

"Nobody's being mean to her," sniffed Vrenda. "Honestly. Anyway..."

I didn't like seeing Eddy upset like that, so I left then.

Eddy was my first kiss, a ways back. My first a lot of things. Even when we stopped that she was special to me. So yeah, I didn't like seeing her upset.

She wasn't far outside. Just on a park bench across the way, one of the shadowed ones that felt more or less private. When I got close I heard her sniffle.

"Hey. Eddy."

She wiped her nose on her sleeve. She was fifteen then, cute as a button even when she was crying. "Aren't you gonna listen to the adventures of Vrenda?" she asked thickly.

"I think she has that covered," I said uncomfortably. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? Apart from Vrenda being this huge vortex of specialest-person-in-the-room?"

"I, uh..."

"And everybody's on her side! You all just pat me on the head and ignore me again!"

"Um..." I should've thought of that. "No. No, Eddy, we weren't ignoring you."

"She always does that," sniffled Eddy. "Like she doesn't have enough, she's gotta hog all you guys's attention too."

"She doesn't do it on purpose."

"Sometimes you're stupid, Vierce." She suddenly leaned into me, throwing one arm around me. "Sometimes you're really, really stupid."

"Uh," I said, settling an arm around her. "You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah. Just...don't go back in there yet."

"Course I won't," I said, and finally thought of something nice to say. "All the best company's here."

5 ATC: Gluttony (Lydian)

Vierce is 18.

"One more," said Totten, leaning slightly over the table.

"I think Dep's already had too much," Vrenda purred. Rizz nodded grim agreement.

"Doesn't matter," said Totten. "One more for the night, for Lydian."

"It doesn't count toward the limit if it's for Lydian," I said. Illyris squeezed my hand. She hadn't known Lydian, but she understood how we cared.

"Brother has a point," added Kirsik.

Lydian would always be one of the Ridgeside crew, but she had died young. Sometimes it was as ordinary as sickness.

"Right you are." Vrenda patted the sloshed Dep's shoulder and waved for a last round of shots.

"To fallen friends," said Rizz.

"To fallen friends," we chorused.

"To Lydian," finished Eddy. We drank up. Afterward Illyris and I helped drag Dep home. There's times we've judged him, but it's not excess if it's for Lydian.

5 ATC: Sloth/Courage (Totten/Illyris)

Double post for 5 ATC: Vierce is 18.

Totten was quiet all through the meal. Usually he had at least a little something to say, but this time he was subdued. I think Rizz and maybe Vrenda already knew

why; the rest seemed to think nothing of it until after Tot knocked back a last drink and cleared his throat.

"Guys," he said, "tomorrow's going to be my last day."

We all got quiet.

"What do you mean, 'your last day'?" Dep said.

"I'm going to the shipping center full-time. Starting some night classes. Seeing to things at home. If you guys ever need stuff I'll see what I can do, but I'm not carrying arms as a resistance fighter."

That burned. "Oh," I said. "Oh, is there a place I can check in to make the resistance over and my life free, too? Because if so, show me the dotted line and we can all sign."

"Vierce," Rizz said warningly. "Better this than burnout."

"We've discussed it with Tot," Vrenda added. "I think this is really best."

I bit my tongue. Tot was a decent guy, but he went to a dark silent place too easily and too often. We worried about him, it's true, and I think any hard thing would break him if he stayed at it too long. This was one thing I couldn't see any way of giving up on, but now Rizz was on his side.

"No. Vierce is right," said Illyris. "You're gonna rejoin our happy civilian population, is that it?"

"Please," Tot said, smoothing back his brown hair with broad square hands. "I can't keep up like this. Taking care of home will be work enough, I just want a little peace. Any way I can make it."

"There won't be peace until we've driven every Imp off this planet and you know it, Tot. You know it! How is sitting on your ass going to make anything better for us?"

Illyris hadn't known him as long as the rest of us had. She didn't know, really know, that sometimes just breathing was all the challenge he could handle. I didn't understand it either, but Rizz and Vrenda were with Tot on this one and I respected them enough to stay quiet.

"If you need anything you'll let us know," said Eddy. "I still expect you for holidays."

Tot smiled weakly. "I'll be there."

"So there is something that'll get you off the couch?" Illyris said roughly. "Just not the occupation. Just not what *runs our lives*. Nice that you think you can choose otherwise, but you're with us or you're worthless."

"Lyr," I said. "Please don't do this. Not all of us are cut out to give as much as you and I can."

“Not cut out? This is all the cloth we’ve got, Vierce. I don’t care what you were cut out for to start with, we need every scrap we have.”

She burned so bright. Always had. She didn’t understand how anyone could do any less. I think she hated him from then on for giving up.

Stars, I loved her.

6 ATC: Wrath/Justice/Restraint (Vierce/Rizz)

Vierce is 19.

We had the Imps cleared and it was down to a civilian. One of ours, arguably. I had him kneeling on the floor. Some Imp patrol had stopped him, I don’t know why, and like a traitor or a fool he had let slip some information about one of the resistance cells. Enough for them to zoom in on two men and grab them before we could do anything. All because this guy talked about “funny activity.” Funny like saving his sorry ass.

“We’re done here,” said Rizz. He was pretty talkative in the field, when communication needed to be clear.

“No, we’re not. The whole reason we had to do this is because of what this snake said!”

The man whimpered when my blaster rifle nudged his head. I didn’t much care.

“He didn’t know,” said Rizz.

“That’s not the point. Why was he even talking to them? Our people are in prison or dead because of him and he’s still breathing.”

Flash kept his mouth shut. He was new around here, and though older than me he deferred to Rizz and rarely seemed inclined to argue with me when I was mad. I liked him, even before we got to be real friends.

“He didn’t have a choice,” said Rizz.

“He could’ve died. He could’ve died like his countrymen do, like we do, instead of handing that to the enemy.”

“He couldn’t fight, Vierce. He had kids to think of.” Rizz wasn’t stupid enough to try to take hold of the rifle, nor even push it aside. He just said “Save that for when you need it.”

“It isn’t right, he walks and they don’t.”

“Can’t make their loss right. We can do justice, and that was those Imps. This isn’t.”

I wasn’t done shooting, or at least not done wanting to. But Rizz usually had a point.

"I'm sorry," whispered the man on his knees. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

It killed me to leave something standing after a loss like that. My scarred face throbbed, though I'm told that months after the injury that pain was probably imaginary. I let the man to his feet, because it was fair. I hated it but I knew it was fair.

"Go take care of your kids," I said. "Just go."

Rizz nodded at me while the man ran. "This was right."

I clenched my jaw and pushed a breath out. "Yeah. Let's go."

7 ATC: Charity/Hope (Dep/Eddy)

Vierce is 20.

A week after the last Imp transport left Kegled II, the Ridgeside crowd threw a party for the people who were about to ship out for service with the Republic. It was a big crowd and a lively one. Kirsk was in town this time around; so were Rizz's father Mister Isling and Totten and a lot of resistance people, some of them come in from other towns because they'd known us during temporary assignments. I think we had everybody but Dep for some reason.

We wandered, we scattered, we talked. We came back to one table to eat, and after that, a round of drinks.

"To fallen friends," recited Rizz.

"To fallen friends," we all said.

"To Lydian," said Eddy.

"And Illyris," said I. And we drank.

Dep swaggered in a little while later. "Stars," I said, "I thought you were dead or something."

He grinned. "Nah. I started on my way to the festivities hours ago, promise." He lowered his voice a little. "But you know I've been helping out my parents with some displaced people who're sorting out where to live now. Couple of 'em were in a bad way tonight, I just stayed with 'em a while to make sure they'll be all right."

"You missed a party on some random citizens' account?"

Dep shrugged. "They needed someone. Besides, the party still seems to be here."

I smiled. "You're all right sometimes, Dep."

"Yeah." He grinned again. "Spread the word."

We went outside a while later, Rizz, Eddy, Vrenda, Dep, Flash, and me. The ones who would be shipping out. It was a warm night, leaning more toward summer than spring. We looked up.

"The Republic did good for us," said Flash.

Rizz nodded.

"Better than good," said Eddy, squeezing Flash's hand. "They put in a lot for our wonderful charming but probably not very important planet."

"This stuff matters to them," I said. "That's why we're going to go give back."

Vrenda sighed dramatically. "They're going to rearrange all the constellations where we're going," she said in her low husky voice. "It'll be very inconvenient."

"Just means you'll have to find some nice fellow to help you figure out the new ones," suggested Dep. "One for every planet."

"And Dep's entire career plan becomes clear," sighed Flash. "Except with women."

"Was it ever in doubt?" I said.

"Nah," said Flash. "Not really."

We were quiet for a bit. Then Rizz spoke up: "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," agreed Eddy. "It all gets better from here."

Planning prank

"No."

"Come on, Vierce."

"No."

"It'll—"

"No."

"But—"

"The answer is no, Lyr."

"You don't even know what I was going to do."

"It falls under 'no good,' I bet."

"But—"

"No."

"You are—"

"No."

Dep clattered in from the street and dragged in a chair to push close to Illyris's.

"Vierce, you in for pranking Kirsck tonight?"

"What? Of course I am, just tell me where to be."

Lyr's eyes went round. "That's what I was trying to tell you!"

"Well you didn't say it was Kirsk."

"You didn't let me get that far into the sentence!"

I looked at Dep. "She's a terrible negotiator."

Dep shrugged. "She really is." He just grinned as she elbowed him and stomped my foot under the table. "We love you anyway, Lyr. Now c'mon, both of you, there's planning to do."

And we were off.

Kirsk dance

Kirsk made an elaborate bow. "Milady. Do you dance?"

Elara looked at me, not out of any serious expectation that I would tell her no. Since eye-rolling couldn't physically impact my brother I just nodded. "He's good," I said honestly.

The floor was crowded; the happy couple had a lot of friends and a lot of them danced. I preferred not to be the bantha trying to avoid treading on toes. So I just watched Kirsk float off with Elara on his arm. He pulled her close and started moving with a blend of cheerful verve and straight-out, scary expertise.

Well, okay, I would find it scary. Elara didn't mind in the slightest.

Five years of in-the-trenches combat will teach you a lot about how a person can move when she has to. This was different, and it was nice to see. She looked good from her coiffed head to her strappy heels, and say what you would about Kirsk's priorities, he knew how to make someone look even better. Kirsk twirled her out and back and she said something, laughing. I just watched. How an idiot like Kirsk can get along with a class act like Elara I never would know, but he had the safety of family. And so did she, now.

She kept her hand on his elbow when they returned to the table. "And that," said Kirsk, "is how it's done."

"Please," I said, and stood. "I could probably show you a thing or two."

"Show her," Kirsk said airily. "I don't follow."

“Ahem,” Elara murmured.

Kirsk grinned. “You’re a special case.”

“Another round?” I said to Elara.

“With pleasure.” Sure, I prefer not to be the bantha in the room, but even a bantha is occasionally inspired. She was steady in my arms, the music was good, and, to be honest, I was besotted. We danced until she laughed and drew back. “I could do with some water,” she said.

“Right.” I slid my arm around her and took a look around. Kirsk was just bowing away from a pretty stranger. He met us back at the table.

And he shot Elara a bright smile. “Told you we could get him to.”

“Hey!”

“Press button A, get adorable and photogenic dance from person B. That’s just science.”

That was just textbook manipulation. “You’re a monster.”

Elara was laughing. Kirsk’s merry brown eyes took us both in. “Yeah, but you’re happy.”

Wedding Planning

I squinted at the display. I shuffled some numbers. I squinted some more. The door slid noisily open and Jorgan popped his head in.

“Am I interrupting, sir?” he said.

“Nah, just bookkeeping,” I said, closing the file. “Come on in.”

“You don’t look too happy about it. Money troubles?”

“No, just the opposite. I’ve got a decent salary coming in and to be honest I don’t know what to do with most of it. I’ve been sending some home for Mama for, well, ever, but the shop’s turning a profit and she’s got Glend now, too. I’m not really needed on that front. She’s threatening to turn back any credits I send her way.”

Jorgan smirked. “So set up a charitable fund for your brother?”

I made a face at him. “I’ve been avoiding putting that name on it. Kirsk can dip out of the regular rainy day fund. I...was thinking about setting something aside for a house fund. Never used to see myself as settling, but if I ever come home I guess I’d better not count on living with Mama.”

“You figure you’d be settling with someone.” There was a smile somewhere in there.

It seemed like bad luck to say it out loud, so I didn’t. “Maybe.” Just the thought of having a home with Elara loosed butterflies in my stomach. The good kind. “It can’t hurt to set something aside, just in case.”

“No, sir. Smart move.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I think so.”

I didn’t tell him that there was something even before a house, or might be. Elara didn’t have any family here to help with arrangements for...for getting married. The thought left me dizzy, and had ever since it first came to me. It wasn’t ready yet, obviously, but I could at least start on having something practical to offer her.

Jorgan cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” I said. “You were saying?”

He grinned, fangs bared. “I was saying, Savins, all I have to do is mention her name some days and you just check out.”

“Sorry,” I repeated. “I am. Consider me officially paying attention. – Wait, you didn’t even say her name.”

The grin widened. “No. The indirect reference is enough.”

“Very funny. Was there a change of subject coming up?”

“Sure, any time you’re on planet to catch it.”

“I don’t know why I tell you anything, Jorgan.”

Proposal

I thought about a thousand and one ways to propose to Elara Dorne, and all of them were stupid.

It’d be nice to have a vacation. Go somewhere really jaw-dropping. Or maybe take her back home, to Kegled II? Or maybe that was too prosaic. Not like we had time off for either option. The ship would be fast but unforgivably boring. Coruscant, maybe, the next time we were there, in one of the Senate gardens or, or something. She deserved more. She deserved fountains, mountain views, whole worlds at her feet. But I didn’t exactly have any of that.

So once I found her ring, I kept it with me. Risky, maybe, since in any given combat action I might end up bleeding on it. But...just in case the chance came up. Even if I didn’t know how it would.

It was Naboo we ended up at one night. The base we were operating out of was pretty striking; it was surrounded on three sides by water, with a few little railing-guarded boardwalks sticking out where you could walk and look out over the sea and the incredible orange sunsets.

Elara, making the regulation fatigue look like royal gear as she always did, leaned on the railing over the orange-streaked sea. “It’s beautiful.”

“You like it?”

“Very much.” She took my hand. “It’s nice to have a few moments like this. To see what peace looks like.”

“Peace is where you are.” Stupid. “Even when we’re fighting, I can’t explain...”

“I know what you mean,” she said, leaning into me.

This. It had to be. I swallowed a world-class lump in my throat and squeezed her hand, fumbling in my pocket with my free hand, pulling away just a tiny bit. “I think it’s time I asked. Elara, you’ve been for me what no one else ever has been and I don’t think anyone else ever could be. Every future I look at, I want you in it.” I thumped to one knee and offered up the little box, flipping it open to show the gold ring with its green-and-clear stones. “Will you marry me?”

Her eyes went round. “Vierce,” she breathed. “You mean it? I—oh, yes!” The smile on her face then I’ll never forget. She held out her hand; it was shaking. Either that or mine were as I picked the ring out of its box. The moment it touched her fingertip I fumbled, and then the ring was falling, bouncing, practically jumping...off the boardwalk and into the water.

I saw where it hit the surface. Where Elara’s engagement ring hit the water and disappeared. Before I really realized I was moving I had my jacket off. “Hold this,” I said, pushing it in Elara’s general direction. “Vierce,” she said, “what are—”

The water hit me like a sack of duracrete, the cold slamming me on all sides. I opened my eyes just enough to see the rocky, plant-scattered bottom, then came up for a desperate breath. Elara was yelling something. I would listen as soon as I had her ring back. I kicked my clunky boots off and dove under. I scanned the place. All the rocks looked alike here, and it was hard to tell from this side exactly where the ring had hit water. Nothing would’ve eaten it...right? Did ring-eating things live around here?

I had to come up for another gasping breath, then I dove again, straining my eyes. The light from above didn’t make it very far through the water; every rock sat on its own little puddle of blackness. How far could the ring have moved once it went under? I couldn’t lose it. Not her ring. This was it. This was the start of our life together, and I’d gone and dropped it. I circled around, trying to look everywhere at once through the murk. Finally I saw a twinkle in a crevice among the rocks. I swam to it and saw the surefire flower shape of the ring. I reached two fingertips in and tried to move it; no dice. I scrabbled at it, terrified of pushing it further in where I couldn’t reach. My fingers were getting clumsy from the cold. My lungs were rolling up in a painful ball, but I couldn’t leave it now. I pulled out my

pocketknife and carefully, carefully eased the blade in to one side, then worried both blade and ring out.

Knife in pocket. Ring in one hand. Boots gathered in other, weighing half a ton each. I floundered up the steep rocky ascent to shore.

She was running toward me from the landward end of the boardwalk. Somebody else was running faster, outpacing her to reach me. Some guy in a brightly colored wetsuit.

“Sir!” he said while Elara caught up. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said through chattering teeth.

With that established, his voice shot to the hard edge of polite. “There’s no swimming in this area, sir.”

“Yeah. Got that.” I dripped some more. The man nodded curtly and turned around to head back to the little house at the start of the boardwalk.

Since I didn’t seem to have the option of sinking through the floor and disappearing, I turned to Elara, who stared at me like she wasn’t sure whether to laugh or yell. Still panting, I stuck out a hand to present the ring. “It took me forever to pick this one out,” I explained weakly, and took her hand, and slid the ring onto her slender finger. An instant later she was up against me, arms around my neck, and I couldn’t not kiss her when she was so close, so perfect, and – it helped a lot just then – so warm. Just the same, I tried to arch my body away a bit. Without actually stopping kissing her. “You’ll get wet,” I pointed out.

She made a noise deep in her throat that said she didn’t take that the way I meant it. “I don’t mind,” she whispered, and pulled me close, and promised me without a word that everything would be all right.

Elara Bumper Ball

“Lieutenant Dorne?”

Elara shot a quick look at the door to her quarters – closed – and looked back to the holo. “Mrs. Savins! This is a surprise.”

“Nothing bad,” said the matronly civilian and mother of Elara’s commanding officer/soon-to-be husband, “so you can take that look off your face. Here, I’ll let Eddy take over.”

The holo image wavered and expanded to include a curly-haired redhead in a Republic uniform. “Lieutenant Dorne! I’ve heard you’re missing a crucial part of wedding prep.”

“I am, am I?” She didn’t know this woman well. For all Elara knew it was some form of hazing. Then again, Mrs. Savins seemed to be in on it.

Eddy grinned winsomely. “I have a few important questions first. Are you okay with loud environments?”

“If I must.”

“What’s your position on drinking?”

“I’ll take some wine socially.”

“Hmm, hmm, noted. How about strippers?”

“I *beg* your pardon?”

“Right. We kind of figured, but I had to check.”

“What is all this about?”

“Well, we heard from Kirsik that your maid of honor is your brother.”

“Yes.”

“And your other bridesmaid is Captain Jorgan.”

“That’s accurate.”

“Which leaves us with no women for your bachelorette party.”

“My what?”

“Your last hurrah with the girls before you disappear into married-land! We talked it over, it’s the best thing for Vrenda and me to do. If you get a day of leave to take on Kegled, without the big guy, we’ll take you out.”

“I...thank you?”

“It’ll be great! Mama Savins says Vierce is coming home for other things soon. Come out with us then?”

“It would be very nice to have you,” Mrs. Savins added.

“And he’ll be out bachelor-ing anyway,” said Eddy. “In, probably, the most conservative way possible. Nothing to worry about.”

“Well...” These people were important to Vierce, and it might not hurt to have a night out. She had almost forgotten what that felt like. “Very well. I’ll go.”

“Yess!” Eddy pumped her fist. “This is gonna be great!”

*

“This is...an arcade.”

“Yep!” Eddy was resplendent in a sequined shirt and fitted pants.

“It looks cleaner than the ones I’ve seen in Imperial towns.” They weren’t exactly reputable places to be, where she’d come from.

“Most of West Ford City is cleaner than Imperial towns,” said Vrenda, edging sleekly around the other two to lead the way in. “Come on. Have you ever played?”

“A few things.”

“How about bumper ball?”

“Bumper what?”

“The cornerstone of Vierce’s existence,” said Eddy. “Come on.”

The mechanics of the bumper ball machine were simple: two side buttons, one controlling one mechanical paddle and one controlling two of them on an obstacle-littered, blazingly colored playing field. Elara played a couple of experimental balls.

“This seems simple enough,” she said.

Vrenda had set up shop at the machine next to Elara’s. Where Elara’s was space-shootout themed, Vrenda’s appeared to involve hitting flimsy farm-animal cards. Elara kept her focus on hers. She was doing well until the ball managed to balance itself atop a divider.

“It’s stuck,” said Elara.

“Hit the machine,” said Eddy. “It’s cheating, but you’re not going to be able to reset it any other way.”

“I knew that had to be illegal,” she said. “That’s why I haven’t been doing it.”

“Senses rules violations up to a meter away. Noted,” murmured Vrenda.

Another ball, and she’d barely cracked the ten million mark. “One more,” she said to no one in particular, and launched.

“I hope the trip in wasn’t bad?” said Vrenda.

“No,” said Elara. “We took the squad vessel in. Though Vierce left me at the spaceport. I’m given to understand that I’m not to talk to him until tomorrow.”

“It’s the rules,” sighed Vrenda.

“Have you gotten to look for a dress yet?” said Eddy, on her other side.

“In odd moments, yes,” she admitted. “Obviously there’s not much time at work, and Regulation 37B specifically discourages personal shopping while on duty.”

“You’re on break,” said Eddy. “Do what you like.”

"I mean to. Mrs. Savins has offered to show me the local establishments."

"Note," Vrenda said sharply. Elara juggled the bumper ball a moment and sent it on its way. "Mama Savins, bless her soul, has many talents. Fashion sense is not one of them."

"Don't worry about vetoing her, though, we do it all the time now," Eddy said brightly. "Less so when we were all twelve."

"You've all known her that long?" The pinball really was a simple enough mechanical system. Once she had the proper position and force mapped out it was just a matter of practice.

Vrenda laughed. "Let's just say I met Vierce when he was a week old. And he probably met Eddy when she was at that same age."

"Oh." It was one thing to know that Vierce had a tight-knit group of friends, and quite another to realize they were family since birth. "It's to your credit that you stay so close."

"Hey," said Eddy. "He doesn't invite just anybody into that."

Elara could not immediately form a response. She just slammed the final target of a long sequence.

"Whoa," she was aware of Eddy saying.

"Shh," said Vrenda.

Multiball and a triple multiplier. Elara went into frantic tapping mode, trying to juggle the three balls active. There was scarcely time to consider scoring; just keeping them all up was challenge enough. It got easier on the second multiball, though. And again on the third. And, in time, the overwhelming implication of acceptance started to seem manageable.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from visiting here in town," she said.

"We are visiting," Vrenda said. "You."

“Figure we’ll get everyone together tomorrow,” said Eddy. “After Mama Savins has had the chance to show you around the shops, obviously. – Critically important question. Has Vierce ever fed you Basin cuisine?”

“What?” said Elara.

“Oh, my,” murmured Vrenda.

“You’ll get to try it,” said Eddy. “Piece of advice? Anything with chicken in it is probably okay.”

“Oh? Noted.”

Finally she was back down to one ball, shooting it towards the multiplier target. It hit, bounced to one side, tapped the top of a divider, fell down the wrong side and straight off the field behind where she would have been able to recover it. Just as Elara was about to make a frustrated noise, the whole machine lit up, beeping frenziedly.

“Top score!” bubbled Eddy.

“I *knew* it,” said Vrenda.

On the screen over the machine was a list of one to ten, with the one highlighted beside an empty line. Below that, in second place, was KAS. Three of the next eight were VRS.

“There’s Kirsk,” said Vrenda. “And several of Vierce’s attempts to beat him.”

“Initials?” Elara started cycling through letters, filling in the gaps. E, J, D.

Eddy beamed at her. Vrenda watched the leaderboard. “You realize you’ll have to come back here after the wedding to put EDS there.”

“I suppose I will.” Elara turned away, leaving the mad celebration of lights behind but keeping the pleasant buzz. “Very well. What else do we have here?”

*

Eddy pressed fried dough upon Elara between games, but when it came time for dinner they left the arcade and bobbed through the narrow but bustling sky lanes of the city to the little brown house and garden nestled between larger, newer buildings. Mama Savins, stout, matronly, was waiting at the door, ready to task Eddy and Vrenda with table preparation.

"Isn't there anything I can help with?" said a bemused Elara while her shepherdesses swept on towards the kitchen.

"Now, now," said her hostess. "You're our guest." Then she seemed to catch herself. Those brown eyes, so very like her son's, sharpened in familiar thought. "If you'd like," she said, "you can help me with the napkins."

Eddy and Vrenda exchanged knowing glances when Mama Savins brought the basket to the table and took out a napkin to demonstrate folding. Elara was too happy to mind.

Dinner was good. She had every promise of the next day being even better.

Dress Shopping

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The bridge was still smoking. I had helped finish the Imperials riding the stopped transport. Now I was standing by the freed civilians, blaster lowered for the time being.

The hero of the hour, Gorth, wrung his hands. "It worked," he said in a small voice. "It worked."

"That chemistry degree working for you?" I said. I was in a good mood. Jobs rarely came this smooth.

"Oh, my stars." He swiped his mouth with this sleeve. "Are they...dead?"

"Every last one. I think your bomb did the trick on the first two."

"Don't say that," he said hurriedly. "Oh, stars. I can't do this."



“Easy, there. Do what?”

“K-kill.” He swallowed hard, red-faced. “I’d do it. I’d do it to Imperials. But my Meribelle...she can’t know I’m a killer.”

“You got a problem with killers?” I said flatly. “We’re at war. If you’ve got a lick of sense you’ll do it again.” The resistance could use a good demolitions man. We could use any man.

“I can’t. You don’t understand. I want to help, I do, but she can’t ever...she can’t know what happened here today. She could accept anyone else doing it, but not me. Not hers.” His chin wobbled. He stood up straighter. “Tell her I was one of the civilians who got rescued, that’s why I was here just now. Don’t tell her I was involved.”

“Are you serious?”

“Here – just so she knows I was in danger. Hit me.”

“What?”

“These guys got roughed up. I have to fit in. Hit me.”

“You want me to tell your girlfriend you had nothing to do with the heroic and completely successful resistance operation, then punch you.”

“That’s about the shape of it, yes.”

A killer, as if that was a bad thing in the world we lived in. Imperials practically didn’t count. I didn’t wind up for much of a punch, just a jab to the jaw. He went reeling. Picking someone three times his size was his fault, not mine.

I followed where he staggered and set a hand on his shoulder. “Come back with me. You belong.”

He touched the edge of his sleeve to his bleeding mouth. “No can do. Meribelle ever asks? You rescued me.”

She never did ask. That was years ago.

~~~~~

Mama and Elara had toured three dress shops in West Ford City. As budget master all I got at the end was a bottom line: here the prices for her top three favorites.

"We didn't include the really expensive one," Elara assured me.

"Well, did you like the really expensive one?" I said.

"She loved it," Mama reported with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "I'm sworn not to say more." And Elara didn't gainsay her.

So when Elara left the room, I asked Mama the price. Then, after a moment's polite reeling, I asked her where to go. And when Mama left the room I headed out into the city.

West Ford City has grown by leaps and bounds ever since the occupation ended. Most of its buildings are red brick or dull bronzium, and we even have a couple of glass skyticklers (Kirk's word for things not quite tall enough to be skyscrapers). It used to just be a transport center, three highways feeding the biggest spaceport on the continent. Well, it's filled out now.

Old Town near Mama's house was an unplanned bustle of streets predating the spaceport, but downtown the streets are broad and arrow-straight, lit in varying tones of gold (every blue-white Imperial bulb was smashed years ago). The banners on each light were at that moment bearing the garish red insignia of our Huttball team, finalists last three years running. People were out in that kind of crowd that still surprised me: busy but lazy, crowded but comfortable. Not scared. There was no curfew here.

The shop at the end of Mama's direction was upscale to say the least. The clear doors whispered open to welcome me. Inside the high, brilliantly lit room I found only a maze of wedding dresses. White, ivory, stuff that wasn't white or ivory but instead something slightly different. And lace. I saw more lace in the first step than I'd seen in my life. It gave off a polite aura of "not for me." Just the same, I pushed further in.

The first non-white thing on that floor was a slim Human in green. She was pinning something up, a veil or something, over a giant frill of a dress. I cleared my throat and she cast a bright-eyed look my way.

“Ma’am,” I said. “The door was open.”

The little woman was frowning at me. Then her eyes went around and she hopped in place. “Oh, my stars. You’re exactly like he described you.”

“Ma’am?” I said. It seemed safe.

“Vierce, umm, Savins!” she said, pointing. “You rescued my Gorth from a security roundup, must’ve been eight years ago!”

“Gorth? You’re Mrs. Atvel?”

“You remember?” It was practically a squeal. “I don’t believe this! In my dress shop! I’m expecting him back any minute, he’ll be so happy....”

“I actually had a question about one of your dresses,” I said weakly.

“Shopping! Certainly, anything!”

“Don’t show me when I tell you. Two women came in here earlier today, one short, one tall and blonde.” And beautiful.

“Oh, they had an excellent eye. I believe they were partial to-”

“Don’t show me,” I said, and cleared my throat. I hated asking for things. “I was wondering whether we could arrange some kind of financing. Installment payments. I only want the best for her.”

“Oh, that price,” she said, gesturing carelessly. “That was the price for an Imperial accent. For the resistance there’s a discount.”

“Really?” I said. She seemed perfectly happy to forgive resistance fighters who weren’t her husband. As for the other part...Imperial accents got second-class treatment a lot of places around here. That was something I could only fix one heart at a time.

“Of course really,” said Meribelle. “Oh, my dear – here! Gorth, look who it is!”

I turned around and there he was: small, round-shouldered, white-faced. He was looking between us two like he’d just caught a ghost leaning over his wife. “Mr. Savins,” he said. “You’ve been chatting?”

“She didn’t even get one anecdote about the rescue,” I said. “All business, this one.” I nodded a tiny bit. He caught it.

“He’s getting married!” cried Meribelle. “We were just discussing the dress-”

“On the house,” said Gorth. “I won’t hear another word.”

I objected, a little, and he insisted, very kindly. He wouldn’t hear another word. Neither would she. The fabric of West Ford City remained comfortably strong.

Sledding with Elara

“I could bring out the other tube,” said Elara.

“It’s better with two people,” I insisted. “This can take us both.”

“It’s less a tube and more a life raft for four you repurposed for the occasion.”

“Well, yes,” I said reasonably. Being two meters tall and more muscle than not made finding appropriate sledding equipment challenging. “Ready?”

Elara looked down the slope. I wondered whether she saw it as I did: a long snowy blue-shadowed straightaway with a promise of speed, a turn with the exciting obstacle of clusters of stark black trees and shrubs, endless possibility beyond. Well, endless possibility came out to a sharp turn and a second straightaway, long and icy, coasting to a halt near a few parking spots for the transports that would bring us back for another run.

The wind sheared right through my hair to sting my scalp, and I let it blow.

Elara’s nose was bright red. “You really should put on a hat. Body heat is lost most rapidly through the face and head.”

“And here I thought you’d insist on a helmet.”

“An insulated helmet would be optimal,” Elara said primly.

I pushed the sled.

Elara squeaked and fell back as I jumped all the way onto the big tube. I grabbed rope handles on both sides. Together we accelerated down the slope, throwing puffs of powdery snow with every bump on the way. I would’ve loved to keep my arms around her but we needed a steady hand on the way between the trees at the turn.

“Lean!” I yelled in her ear.

“What?” she yelled.

“Lean left!” And there we barely made it, flying under an arch of branches.

“This is a deathtrap,” gasped Elara as we slewed into the final straightaway.

“Only if you’re not paying attention!” I laughed with the lightness of memory.

“You like it?”

I might possibly have steered into a jump. It just works out that way sometimes.

“We are definitely getting helmets,” squeaked Elara while we both bounced from the impact.

I let go the rope handles and settled my arms around her. She leaned into me, two layers of thick coats keeping us more or less separate but still joined in momentum. “Totally safe from here on,” I assured her collar.

“Yes, until you do it again,” Elara told the wind.

“Until we do it again?”

Elara laughed, the sound that made the whole maneuver worthwhile. “Of course.”

Kirsk's Bedtime Story

Kirsk and I had lined up at home for once, and we were sitting out on the porch after dark, watching the few stars we could still see over the overgrown city.

Kirsk seemed more thoughtful than usual. "I thought up a story the other day."

"Oh? What's that?"

He spread his hands in an imaginary text scroll across the stars. "Once upon a time there was a soldier with his head so far up his unmentionables that he couldn't even see the gorgeous, good-hearted woman in front of him. Eventually, after being prodded by literally everyone he's ever known, he managed to extract his head and catch her before she got away. The end."

I flicked a light swat in his general direction. "That's a terrible story, Kirsk."

"I'll be telling it to your children as a bedtime story one of these days."

"You're not telling my kids stories about how far my head was up my— anything. And who said I was having kids?"

Kirsk grinned. "Addendum: He's still pretty clueless. The end."

Afterword

As with many of my projects, Vierce was unplanned in conception and unguided in execution. I played his storyline blind and wrote scenes for the short fic weekly thread as they came up. Working his material into an actual beginning, middle, and end after the fact was surprisingly easy, and I was uncommonly happy with the result.

This work intentionally brackets Elara's experience: from leaving her last non-home to arriving at a new home. It's just that Vierce is the narrator.

Vierce Savins was a lot of things. My rage against Imps, my affection for the neighborhood boys growing up, my experience with people who come out of an ordeal much, much angrier than they came in. In the end I think he had constructive answers for all those things. But the discovery of those answers hinged on somebody who shouldn't have had to defend her existence to him.

But who did, patiently, persistently, and unapologetically. Long enough for even him to learn.

It's no secret that Elara Dorne is not only one of my favorite companions, she's one of my favorite video game NPCs period. She's not compliant at all times on all points but she believes in what's right and she won't compromise in doing it. It was so strange after a Sith Warrior run. It was so, so nice. It was not what Vierce was expecting or ready to cope with.

Thirteen years of war, four of training, two of action. Coping came very, very late in that sequence. But hey, sometimes good things happen to good people. And for all his harsh edges, I think in the end he's a decent guy.

What if Elara hadn't gotten this assignment? I suspect she would continue excelling at a dead-end job, and Vierce would've died young in spite of Jorgan's brotherly support.

Vierce was my answer to the Empire. I think it was emphatic.

Final Notes

brightephemera has been playing BioWare RPGs since 2009 and Star Wars: The Old Republic since prelaunch, and has always had a bad habit of revising favorite stories.

You can find Bright's fiction blog at serialephemera.tumblr.com, and questions and comments will be read for as long as the blog is active at serialephemera.tumblr.com/ask.

The center for Bright's SWTOR fic downloads is

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