

“The last thing Jack saw was his alarm chrono flashing 12:07 before he felt the creatures grotesque claws digging through his chest while the other hand muffled his screams and whispered for him to be silent....”

Gathered around a small campfire in the Felurigade, an odd cast of Arconans had gathered. It was a small group that consisted of Braecen Kaeth, Uji Tameiki, Celevon Edraven, K’tana, the Shadow Lady herself and, oddly, the Combat Master and former Consul, Marick. Atyiru had dragged him along against his will, and sat quietly beside her as he watched the final member of the gathering continue with his tale.

“Jack bolted upright in his bed, panting and covered in sweat. It was only a dream, he thought. He was safe.” Kordath paused dramatically for a beat. “Until he looked over at his chrono, and saw that it read: 12:06. The door to his closet creaked open.”

The Ryn delivered the last line with a practiced flourish. You had to give the Ryn credit--he knew how to work an audience. There was a few startled intakes of breath and nervous murmuring. Atyiru pressed against Marick’s side and shivered.

Marick blinked a few times and then folded his arms across his chest. “If that was really the case, Jack had a full minute to prepare himself. He could have grabbed something from the nightstand, used it as a weap--”

A chorus of groans circled the campfire.

“It’s just a story, you karkheaded nerf,” K’tana exclaimed in exasperation. This was the third story that the Hapan had managed to buzzkill. “Ugh,” she grunted with a flip of her Lekku.

Marick started to mouth a retort, but felt Atyiru’s grip on his arm tighten in warning. He quieted and a silence lulled over the group.

“Well then,” Braecen said, sensing the opportunity. “The three of you are all survivors of Timeros’ training. Surely you have some good stories?” The Quaestor gestured at K’tana, Atyiru, and Marick.

K’tana snorted indelicately. “You mean being forced to spend any significant amount of time around him?” She paused to think, and then shrugged her lithe shoulders. “Yea, I got nothing.”

The group was quiet and nodded along. Braecen pointed a finger at the Shadow Lady without a word. Atyiru shifted slightly, but kept her arms wrapped around Marick’s. She tapped her lip.

“Let me see,” she said slowly before flashing an impish grin.

Marick pinched the bridge of his nose and a chuckle or two escaped the others.

"Well, there is of course the famous Krayt dragon story!"

A few murmurs. People had heard of the story in varying degrees. K'tana perked noticeable and leaned uncomfortably close to the Consul. Atyiru just grinned and cupped her chin before pushing her backwards gently.

"So, there I was, walking into the training room ready to get some training. As soon as I open the door, a giant mother-karking krayt dragon comes flying at me! Using the first lesson that was ingrained into my conscious, I of course--

--Dodged," Marick and K'tana said in unison.

--thank you lovelies, yes, dodged it!" Atyiru beamed. "It was of course a hologram, which I ended up destroying. Problem solved. Unfortunately,

"Blinky, that's not really a scary story," Kordath explained.

"Oh. Well, then later on when I visiting the estates on Eldar, he actually DID let a wild Krayt loose to prove his point." She paused and looked to the side, thoughtful. "Stratty may or may not have sacrificed some virgins in the process as well. Who remembers these things, honestly!"

There were a few laughs and more than one grumbling of the term, "Entars" in a off-handed manner.

After the group settled, Braecen moved his pointer-finger to Marick. The Hapan blinked once, and then shrugged the shoulder that Atyiru hadn't pressed herself again.

"I'm not very good at this," Marick admitted. The Shadicar could smile, weave, and bluff his way through the various layers of a crime syndicate stronghold, but looked to be at a loss for how to tell a simple campfire story. After a moment's hesitation, he started to speak, the slight lilt of his accent carrying evenly to everyone gathered around the fire.

"Early on in my training, Timeros got me a Pittin. It was a small thing, really, with all black fur except for his paws, which were a stark white. It looked like he had tiny little boots on. I called him "Socksie."

Faces grew somber as a few guessed the direction of the story. Atyiru turned her face to study Marick's profile, but remained quiet like the rest. Marick rarely talked about his training. All she knew was that he vowed never to follow fully in Timeros' path.

"Timeros told me that Socksie was to be with me twenty-four seven. I would eat, sleep, bathe, and train with him in proximity. It was supposed to show that I was capable of keeping track of another organic lifeform other than my own. This went on for a few months, until Socksie got

bigger and my training had advanced to where Timeros was finally ready to send me on my first mission. When I got to the armory, he told me to place Socksie on the table. I obeyed. Socksie sat down obediently and started to preen, looking over at my Master and I quizzically in a way that only Pittins seem to be able to pull off. I smiled and made a hand gesture to placate him.”

Marick paused for a single breath and continued without any expression other than a perfunctory blink.

“Tim nodded and then handed me one of his Westars. I took the pistol in hand and initially thought he was giving it to me as a gift. Pride welled up inside me as I looked the gun over. I hadn’t started training with Blasters yet, but Timeros was known for his proficiency with the weapon. And then he pointed a finger at Socksie and ordered me to shoot him.”

A beat.

“I protested, of course. I furrowed my brow and shouted defiantly in his face. I told him exactly where he could shove his blaster if he thought I was going to do it. He stared me down with that unwavering calm, and I slowly started to feel a weight pressing down on my shoulders that had nothing to do with physical matter. The air around me seemed to become thinner, and my heart started to race as I trembled and thought of all the things I’d considered horrible at that point in my life. They flashed before more, clear as pictures.

“And then he mentioned that if I didn’t do it, I wasn’t worthy of being an Arconan. He said I might as well pack my bags, because he would send me home to my family back on Hapes.”

Atyiru bit her lip and tightened her grip on Marick’s arm. His voice was hard and flat as stone, and his face a passive mask. But she knew him well enough and could feel the swelter of emotions that he was unconsciously suppressing with his will.

“I shot him. There were tears, but he told me they were pointless to shed. He told me that the lesson was two-fold. Emotional attachment was weakness. And that in order to best serve Arcona, I needed to be able to handle these types of situations without hesitation.”

The Hapan finished and looked down at the fire. There was no sign of anger, sorrow, or remorse. He simply looked tired, his eyes distant as they soaked in the pattern of the flickering flames.

Silence radiated. Everyone around the campfire simply stared at the Consul in a mixture of pity and horror.

“I guess there was also the time that he made me stay awake for 5 days straight and then forced me to recite poetry from a book he had me memorize the week before while sparring. There were the random nights where I would wake up to a hovering lightsaber against my neck.

If I cried out or moved too quickly I'd cut my own head off. There was the time when he made me drink Bittersshade and see how long I could endure the burning sensation in my bloodstream before taking the antidote. There was this one time--"

"So, who wants snacks!?" Kordath exclaimed, cutting off the Hapan with an exaggerated gesture as he brought out a box and opened the lid.