

Commodities

Rhace Tarrin, #13358

Nighthawk Captain's Quarters

1730 Hours

Lieutenant Colonel Rhace Tarrin stood at ease in front of the desk of the sitting Captain - literally and figuratively - of the *Nighthawk*. Rulvak Qurrroc was obviously going on hard times. The bags under his eyes were growing and it felt like his sleep was ever so slowly taking up less and less time of his day, to make way for more paperwork and what seemed like more busywork herding around the core crew of his vessel. His executive officer Emily had recently made the decision to step down and in turn Rulvak had decided to go it alone - perhaps for a while he had contemplated asking Arcia Cortel to step back into the role of XO, but with her sudden departure to Clan Odan-Urr - ostensibly to strengthen the Dajorra-Yhi Concordat in the wake of the bombing of New Tython - she was no longer a factor, either on board the ship or for his decisions entirely.

It made this place seem a lot more empty. All of her computers were gone, the infinite data flow from the DIA now fallen as silent as the vigil it stood. In fact, it seemed that around this time, the entire crew's morale had slumped to an all-time low. It was not an easy thing to have to deal with, no. Arcona was *suffering*, and so was the *Nighthawk*, a reflection of the Shadow Clan's beating heart.

"What is it, Tarrin?" Rulvak asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes a little. "Sorry. That came out a little more harshly than I intended. Take a seat and let's chat. We don't do that anywhere near enough, given your posting."

"I'll be fine, sir," Rhace replied, those clipped Imperial tones showing through. The commandant of the Talons, the vessel's onboard security and expert boarding team was very much a result of his upbringing. Even now he reflected the First Order's mentality and methodology as opposed to the considerably more relaxed Arconan way. "Thank you, regardless. I actually came to check on you."

"That's... awfully kind of you, Colonel," Rulvak replied, sitting up in his seat. He could tell he was being watched, judged, even monitored by the black-haired operative. It wasn't entirely comfortable, but those words seemed sincere enough. Then again, he was talking to a man who could lie his way into getting a million credits from a Hutt. "What's on your mind?"

"Permission to speak plainly, Captain," Rhace said, eyes locking over the half-Sephi's head for just a moment - and only a moment's hesitation in doing so.

"Granted. You have that right in here behind closed doors, Rhace... within reason." A slight frown. Rulvak had a *bad* feeling about this.

"What is our mission, Captain? Not just our tasking orders right now in the wake of the bombings. What is it that *you* want this ship to do?"

"Excuse me? I don't understand your meaning here, Colonel."

"I mean, sir, what do you want the *Nighthawk* to achieve? You have no executive officer - you're going all of this alone. The ship's morale is as low as I've seen it since coming aboard and right now I'm not sure you know what you want to do with it."

Anger flared in so much of the Captain's being that both hands pushed down on the heavy desk and the man levered his way upwards. "Lieutenant Colonel, that's dangerously close to insubordination," he snarled, rage starting to simmer behind those leaf-green eyes.

Finally, Rhace took a seat, sighing only *slightly* audibly. For him to not stay at parade rest and choose to sit was a sign indeed that there was something on his mind. For now, he had to talk down Rulvak's anger and defuse the tension in the air. "I'm sorry, Captain. I'm not here to question your authority. On the contrary, I'm here to help it. Let me ask you - how much military experience do you have beyond being a part of the Shadesworn?"

A minor scowl. "None," came the truthful reply. Rulvak didn't like talking about that wherever possible. It was not the place of the crew to ask about his prior experience, but he had no reason to lie here, either.

"Very well. Allow me to lend you mine, then. You're walking a difficult and dangerous path without a complete chain of command right now. I feel that you're starting to struggle under the workload very slightly. The fact you haven't already quit out of sheer frustration is admirable, but I feel that you need to be utterly confident in your path to have this vessel succeed, or you're going to need some assistance, even if you don't name an XO."

"Right," the Sephi hybrid said warily. "But what does that have to do with what you're about to say."

Rhace nodded slightly. The crux of the matter. "Very well. Have you ever considered the fact that a Force-wielder in the Brotherhood is no more a commodity than aurum or bronzium?"

"What are you talking about?"

"In my studies as Magistrate to the Headmaster, I have time to examine the database of the dossiers of the Brotherhood. I have turned up some very interesting figures - did you know there are over *fourteen thousand* unique Force-wielders across Brotherhood space? Yet, somehow, of the personnel assigned to Clans with a number assigned to them, there are only seven 'mundane' personnel of my rank or higher and Arcona has three at my rank. Colonel Cortel was one until her transfer to Odan-Urr. Consider that, Captain. Fourteen thousand Force-users. Three Lieutenant Colonels in the Shadesworn ranks. It doesn't add up, does it?"

Now that he mentioned it, that was a seriously odd statistic. Arcona was known for its proud military traditions, certainly, but were there really that many people in the Brotherhood's history? "But isn't that only due to the fact that it was only recently that mundane personnel earned the right to a dossier number?"

"Correct, but the figure is still so hilariously low that the number wouldn't be so far off fourteen thousand. Twelve thousand, at best, in my projections. Consider the implications: fourteen thousand confirmed Force-wielders in history across the past decade or so. All here, in Brotherhood space. Your kind is a commodity, Captain, moreso than the nameless thousands of mine. Arcona saw fit to open an entire Battleteam of that commodity recently in the form of Tal'mahe'ra right here in House Galeres. And, you may be one of the Equites - but that is merely a word for equals, along with multiple nameless hundreds of your predecessors. You have so much competition for real estate that for you to stand out above the rest you *must* be ready to take drastic and confident action to blaze a path towards the future. The *Nighthawk* can ill afford to face the same fate as Soulfire. Force-users, Battleteams - in the sociopolitical structure of the Brotherhood, they are nothing more than commodities."

A minor grumble about that left the Battlemaster's lips. The 'legendary unit' status was barely more than a farce, in his eyes. He knew that Rhace had been tasked to Abyss Squadron, the training group for Void - and had not once left the *Nighthawk* in his taskings for Abyss. Not a single time. Soulfire had just been commissioned as one of these units and he almost felt bad for what was ultimately a decommissioning of the unit. It was unfair, but given the circumstances and the changes in the dynamics of the Brotherhood as a whole - what was rapidly coming Arcona and Odan-Urr versus the Iron Throne in little more than a shadow war - two military teams were perhaps unnecessary. A team that could divulge the meaning of hidden artifacts to employ against Pravus was a good idea, in theory.

Rhace finally piped up once more. "So what will you do, Captain? You stand at a crossroads: you can either sink into anonymity like hundreds of Equites before you, or you can blaze a trail for himself into the annals of Arconan history. There is only *one* military Battleteam in House Galeres now, Captain Qurroc. I urge you to take that chance and use it to its fullest."

There weren't any words out of Rulvak's mouth for quite some time as he leaned back in his seat, hand on his chin, deep in thought. "Thank you for your input, Lieutenant Colonel. I need some time to process this. Dismissed."

"Aye aye, sir."

The Imperial sniper stood up, saluted perfectly, then strode out confidently with the door hissing shut behind him. Rulvak exhaled sharply leaning back in his chair as he felt the pressure of a mountain come crashing down on his psyche.

"Why do I keep people like him close by," he murmured to himself, rubbing his eyes tiredly. This was not how he'd expected this discussion to go. But maybe-- just *maybe*-- he had a point somewhere in there. Tal'mahe'ra was dedicated to the mysteries of the Force. With Soulfire gone, it was leaving prime real estate for military action and commando strikes. Perhaps he could use that to his advantage. Somehow.

But how?

The fates contrived to make life difficult for the Captain, going alone. But he would endure. This was not the first hardship in his life and would be far from the last. With the support of a good crew - which he knew he still had, at the end of the day - he would make the Nighthawk shine brightly as a beacon for the Shadesworn in battle once more.

He would not be a *mere* commodity. He would not fade away like so many more before him.

Nighthawk Landing Bay ***1735 Hours***

The sound of blaster fire was sporadic but deliberate in its hammering peal, energy bolts lashing against targets on the far wall as the newest crewmen practised their firing drills with one of the most experienced gunfighters in all of Arcona. Emily Hune, up until recently the Executive Officer of the vessel until the drastic shake-up of the power structure aboard the *Nighthawk*, was lending her eyes and ears to the development of the new crewmen - mostly at the prompting of her partner. After all, the ex-First Order soldier couldn't do everything here. Despite stepping down as the second-in-command, she still cared enough to help out and do her bit for the Clan and her shipmates.

Routine blaster training was mandatory for everyone aboard the *Nighthawk*. Not just for the mundane crewmen but for the Force-users aboard, purely because there would inevitably be situations where a lightsaber would not be accessible, or even available. Being able to scrounge a blaster off a battlefield or even keeping a surprise sidearm always was considered an integral part of a soldier's life, so here they were.

"Okay, kids, let's see what you're doing wrong," shouted the Sephi over the din. "Cease fire!"

Without any hesitation the blaster fire ceased, the junior crewmen heeding the orders of the senior officer. All of them looked over to the woman as she paced up and down the line, looking at each of them and offering a few words of wisdom - a quick posture change for Stang Mach, who was a great shot normally; a quick word of advice about gripping with the pinky for Shawnathan, and a hint on not closing both eyes for when Jake Blazer was shooting.

"Okay, boys and girls. Listen close, because I'm going to say this once. Almost every single one of you can wield the Force. Almost every single one of you has a lightsaber. Do you know what that makes you against a blaster-wielding enemy?"

"At an advantage? A lightsaber is one of the best weapons in the Galaxy," offered Mac with more than a little superiority in his voice, his high still running wild as a newly-minted Knight of Arcona - who, truthfully, didn't see much point to this exercise. He had a *lightsaber*. Fending off blaster bolts, fighting swathes of enemies-- that was his arena. Shooting a blaster seemed so primitive, so backwards to him. He should have been practising his lightsaber forms, taking every moment to hone his craft now that he had access to so much more knowledge.

"No, you asshole, it makes you *dead* the second you underestimate a good shooter." The ice in Emily's voice was apparent as she changed tones incredibly quickly, going from the kind teacher to the no-shit bounty hunter. "You know what? There are more blaster experts in the Galaxy *right now* than there are Forcies in history. That means more people have had practise being able to out-shoot a Jedi than you'll ever have time to get good with your little laser sword. I'll prove it to you, right now."

All eyes turned to Mac as he folded his arms. "Go for it," he sneered, fully expecting Emily to draw her slugthrower and shoot *him* instead. The tension in the air was thick between the two, but they all knew Emily was not so extreme as to hurt him out of hand for his insubordination.

"Major Garrlan!" she shouted in response. Kharoc Garrlan had not said much during this exercise, but he was here too, knowing the value of honing his craft. Just like Rhace, he'd been an Imperial soldier, so she knew what he could do - in a single fluid motion he shut his eyes, unholstered his sidearm with his off hand and put a single deadeye shot into his target downrange without even looking.

The silence was palpable.

Those dark brown eyes fluttered open as deliberately as his shot had been taken, staring down Mac. The Knight's eyes grew wide in shock, disbelieving what he was actually seeing. Kharoc didn't have time for that kind of idiocy. Anyone who was going to take the value of a good blaster for granted needed to be put in their place, especially in the evolving Brotherhood.

"I-"

"Let me just stop you there, kid." Emily took a step forward and put a finger against the Knight's chest. " Don't bother. I'm going to explain this to you in very simple terms."

Her eyes cast around, searching the souls of the assembly before her. All eyes were on her, hanging on to her every word. After all, if she'd been the ship's XO, she must have done so for a reason. "Lightsabers are good weapons, don't get me wrong. But just like a blaster they have their disadvantages too. There are so many Jedi, Sith, whatever, who cares any more what you wanna call yourselves, in the Brotherhood that lots of people know how to deal with a lightsaber. You can't just think that you're hot stuff because you can wield a little flashlight better than I can. The second you let your ego get in the way you're going to get killed and that's a damn *fact*."

Breathe, Em.

Too much was she letting her feelings get in the way of this lesson. She needed to relax, to ensure that they took something away from this other than her unbridled annoyance at their egotism.

"A lightsaber is a commodity as far as the Brotherhood cares. So is a blaster, for the rest of the Galaxy, and it's still an effective weapon. Look at the Clone Wars. How many Jedi Masters got gunned down by a standard blaster rifle, eh? You've all been through the Shadow Academy, just like me. We *all* study this stuff. It's happened a thousand times and if you aren't careful, it'll happen to you too."

From the ashes of annoyance rose the flicker of a wolfish smile, the hunter-predator in her spirit rising just for a moment for them to see. "A commodity 'round here can do a hell of a lot if you let it, kids. Never forget that."

"Class dismissed."

One by one, the assembled crew of the *Nighthawk* began to filter out of the hangar bay - with the exception of Kharoc, who was last to leave. He locked eyes with Emily for just a moment to offer her a moment of his time. "Thanks for the class, bounty hunter. The kids needed that."

"Pleasure's mine, Major. Great shot, by the way. I'll see you around soon?"

"Count on it." The soldier nodded once, then left the hangar bay, leaving Emily alone to her thoughts.