

Sins of The Past: Episode II

Fallen Loyalties

Mateus Kelborn, #13358

AGV Nighthawk **1158 Hours, Selen Orbit**

"Tripwire in position."

The quiet voice was little more than a whisper to the communications console of the *Nighthawk*, breaking the silence aboard the ship's bridge. The voice in this question was Lieutenant Colonel Rhace Tarrin, codenamed Tripwire for one single reason - once the enemy patrol passed his location as they entered the supply depot, the sniper would use his laser rifle to set off a series of explosives. The proverbial tripwire. Ideally, this would take out the rumoured supply base of the mercenaries that the Dajorra Intelligence Agency had picked up, as well as the mercenaries themselves. The rumour was that a single squad would be coming back from their patrol just as noon broke on Selen in an old industrial facility and the place would be lightly guarded. All it took was waiting for them to walk in range of the detonation, then taking the shot - an entire squad was a good take when the ammo dump was at its lowest.

All hands were silent as they listened with bated breath.

"Targets approaching," reported the operative. "Four, five, six, seven, eight, ni-..."

A pause. Silence, on both ends of the comm line. Quaestor Braecen Kaeth looked at the bridge crew of the vessel as he stepped forward, locking eyes with Captain Rulvak Qurroc. Something did not seem right about this mission already. They could both feel it.

"Eighteen, nineteen, twenty- this isn't a single squad, *Hawk* - this is a full resupply," the sniper whispered, urgency in his voice. "It's crawling with bogeys out here. They're fanning out. Permission to scrub the mission before I get spotted."

"Negative, Tripwire," said the Quaestor sternly in reply, holding up his hand as Rulvak rose from his seat to make the call to bring home his subordinate. "We need intel. Can you hold your position?"

"Sir, that is a negative, I repeat, negative - recon drones are now going airborne. They're on to me. I'm bugging out immediately - I need evac." The panic was evident as Rhace Tarrin tried his best to keep himself under control, but that mask was slipping.

The scene unfolding below them was one of chaos, as far as House Galeres was concerned. Teroch's mercenaries had decided to bring in a whole team to the depot, complete with backup and scouting gear - this was *not* what the data the DIA gleaned had promised them. This should have been an easier mission. This was not supposed to happen and both leaders knew that in that moment.

"We're sending a shuttle now, Tripwire," replied Rulvak before the Quaestor could get a single word in. "Evac immediately. That's an order. Get yourself home."

"Copy, *Hawk*, pulling out now- oh, fierfek- they're on to me. They've spotted me. I-"

The comm line hissed for three seconds, then fell silent. Glances were shared, worry rising in the eyes of the many gathered around.

"We are no longer tracking Tripwire's biometric data," said one of the bridge hands in perfect monotone as his hands shook uncontrollably. "Lieutenant Colonel Tarrin has been killed in action."

Braecen looked down at the Captain of the *Nighthawk* as the half-Sephi returned the gaze, a mixture of emotion breaking over his face - anger, sadness, loss. That resonated deeply with the Shadeborn, having just made the call to keep him there. Mere seconds had just caused the death of one of Galeres' own. It was the end of the career of one of the Iron Legion's best, a worthy soldier. This mission was far more costly than had been originally planned. The loss of one of the crew of the *Nighthawk* was a crushing blow.

There was no hesitation in the words the Krath spoke in the next moment. "Send down a full strike team. Raze that facility to the ground. Bomb it from orbit if you have to. I want every single one of them *burned alive*." Nothing but unbridled rage seethed through his voice, the crushing pain of vengeance consuming every word he spoke.

Within moments, the Krath spun on his heels and left the bridge, hands folding in front of him as he considered the consequences of losing one of his best operatives. The sniper was skilled, that was for sure. But ambushed and killed thanks to a call he'd made? Braecen could only consider one thing in his mind, when nobody else was watching him, probing him for what he thought of the situation.

One thing.

Loyalty had its price.

But to whom?

Throne Room, The Citadel

1608 Hours

One Day Later

The tension in the air was palpable. Seated upon the Serpentine Throne was Atyiru herself, staring down at the kneeling forms of Braecen Kaeth and Rulvak Qurroc. Beside the throne was Proconsul Uji, tapping quietly on his datapad as he refused to stare up at the two men before the Shadow Lady.

"Report, gentlemen," she commanded.

It was Braecen that spoke, voice steady - all business. "Lieutenant Colonel Tarrin's mission was a failure. Our intelligence was incorrect and he was ambushed in return. Tarrin is confirmed as KIA. We failed, my Lady. There are no excuses."

The Miraluka paused, folding her fingers as she considered what to say. Her sadness was palpable, the frown on her lips a real indication that she considered this a loss. "Rhace was a friend," she declared after a few moments' pause. "A good friend. A loyal soldier. His service to me- to Arcona- was originally just a favour to a friend of mine, but he called this place home too, in time. He will be missed dearly."

The Krath diverted his eyes back down, wordlessly.

"Who approved this mission? That he was deployed solo?" Atyiru asked of her two subordinates, considering each in turn.

"Me, my Lady," answered Rulvak dutifully. "Tarrin insisted that he could do it solo. I had faith in him."

"And you had no team on standby? No backup plan?"

"The evac team did not reach him in time."

"Hmm."

Atty leaned back in her seat, the eyeless stare unsettling as much as it was intimidating. Processing this was not easy for her.

"Gentlemen, we walk in perilous times. Our Clan appears weak and fractured enough to our enemies as it is and we just sent one of our best operatives to his death. Those enemies will sense this as a weakness if word of this gets out. I am not pleased. I am not amused. Frankly I am disappointed in the *both* of you. I expect better of you both next time."

Silence. Disappointment was rare, on her part. Neither Galeres leader deigned to speak.

A tired smile, a wave of her hand. "Don't mistake me. I know that this sort of thing happens on the battlefield. But the *Nighthawk* is supposed to represent the best of the best in Arcona and we just lost one of its ranking officers. We will plan, we will prepare and *we will do better*. Understood?"

"Yes, my Lady," answered both men in perfect unison.

A smile. "Good. My faith in you has not led me astray so far. I hope it never does, my friends. Dismissed."

Rising, Braecen and Rulvak left the throne room, leaving only Consul and Proconsul alone in the chamber.

"Uji, can we replace Rhace?" Atty asked, before she rushed to cover her mouth. The masque of leadership dropped ever so slightly. "That sounded so callous. Let me rephrase that. Can we send a replacement strike team member to the *Hawk*?"

The datapad scrolled, the man processing names and faces, concealing his smirk behind the glow of the object in his hands. "We have a few candidates that would be good additions to the crew that are currently House-unassigned Shadesworn. Ananke, Tyraeus, Kelborn... take your pick."

A finger came to the Consul's lips as she pondered the names. "Kelborn," mused the Shadow Lady. "The Mandalorian? Serious guy? I barely remember the other two."

"That's him. Seer Mateus Kelborn, specialties of Force Healing and Battle Meditation. At your request he could join with Galeres and serve aboard the *Nighthawk*. Currently not assigned to a House. I can arrange that for you immediately." Not once had Tameike looked up from his datapad, scrolling through what felt like infinite amounts of data; people, faces, places, things. Camera feeds. Identities. Killers of one of the Shadesworn's own with information of the DIA's providing. Agents that he could use to track down this information. People he trusted. People he knew were loyal to Arcona for the sake of the Shadow Clan.

"Do it. They could use him right now. Get him there ASAP," Atyiru said as she levered herself out of the Serpentine Throne. The rushing feeling of power that being seated in that chair dissipated in her mind. "I have a call to make."

"Your friend?" Uji asked, casting his eyes up from his pad for the first time since Braecen and Rulvak entered the room.

"My friend, yes. You remember Mirus, I think - another long-lost friend. It's a shame how many of those we're losing lately, isn't it?"

"You're not wrong, my Lady. Not wrong at all."

AGV Nighthawk
1609 Hours, Selen Orbit
The Same Day

As the ship's quartermaster, it was inevitably the duty of mercenary Emily Hune to clean up the effects of the dead and clear out their quarters so that a new crewman could assume that position aboard the ship. Out of everyone aboard, Rhace's death had hit her hardest; they had grown up on Naboo together, fought together, trained together-- for a fleeting time loved together-- come to Arcona together. While their attachment had been up and down, their *friendship* was the truest thing that they had known. Now it was gone. All gone, thrown away on the suicide mission he loved so much. She'd known it would take him, eventually. Now it had, and now he was gone forever. There was no coming back.

Now she was the one responsible for removing him from the lives of the crew of the *Nighthawk*, removing the memory of Rhace Tarrin from Arcona's annals and moving on wordlessly.

As she opened his wardrobe to see his black First Order officer's uniform with his freshly-printed Lieutenant Colonel rank plaque pinned to his chest, her heart lurched up into her throat, threatening to bring the past two meals up with it-- meals she'd barely eaten to begin with.

She couldn't do this. She didn't have it in her. What was the point in being here, with the *Hawk*, with Arcona, without him?

Kark it. A sudden decision.

She started throwing things into the plasteel crate as fast as she could with no regard to how neat it was - things she liked of his that she could find, which was essentially the whole room anyway. Uniforms, photos, mementos. She couldn't get his blaster; that was back on Selen and nobody fancied trying to recover his body from the smouldering wreck that was the decimated supply base. Chances were it had been incinerated in one of many proton torpedo blasts, truthfully. His funeral would be held with an empty casket and she had no mind to be there.

Left looted, her second-last stop was her quarters; she had to do the same thing to her own belongings. With his crate half-full she could probably fit her own things in here if she really tried, given that a military ship didn't give you a lot of room for personal effects anyway.

It was strange to be able to pack what felt like her entire life into a little box in under five minutes. Nobody could know what she was doing, nobody to see her; the door was locked, her heart racing, pounding against her ribcage with every beat. Emily would not be caught dead here any more. Slugthrowers, check. Hat, check. Coat, check. Clothes and photos in the crate, check. Her lucky charms, check. Slugthrowers, check again. All the other assorted crap in her life, check. Whatever. It was time to get out of here.

The crate at this point was resting on a hover sled. She pushed it, making eye contact with not a soul as she pushed it towards the *Nighthawk's* hangar, not caring about anyone or anything on the way. The plan was simple enough: take a shuttle to Selen's surface, find a ship, leave the Dajorra system and *never look back again*. She wouldn't be caught dead under Arcona's banner for as long as she could help it. Whatever. They weren't going to pay her enough to stay. She wasn't valuable enough to them and she didn't care enough about their cause anyway.

The hangar bay was the typical milieu of activity, crewmen moving back and forth as they hurried to go about their typical tasks. The shuttle sat there quietly, waiting for someone to take it down to the surface of the plane, ramp open. Very few people were looking at her; someone pushing cargo into the hangar to be loaded onto a ship was a fairly common sight down here.

There was just one thing standing in her way. Well, two. Shawnathan Do'urden, Executive Officer of the *Nighthawk* and Major Kharoc Garrlan. Both men were standing at the ramp of the ship, the Acolyte with his arms folded and the Major standing at an easy parade rest. Undeterred, Emily began pushing her cargo sled towards the ship's ramp - and Shawn didn't hesitate in stepping forward to block her path.

"That's far enough, Hune," said the young Gray Jedi, holding his hand out to try and get in her way. "We saw you on security cameras and the crew reported your strange behaviour. You aren't leaving this ship without authorization."

"And what are you going to do to stop me? Lock me up?" she challenged, voice full of venom. Her eyes and cheeks were both burning, though it was harder to see with her Sephi complexion; she refused to allow the tears that she *wished* she could cry over her friend to run loose now. "Get out of my way. I'm leaving. I don't care what you want."

She tried to push the sled forward, but Kharoc stepped in to help the ship's XO; together, the two men formed a formidable barricade, able to hold her sled. The Major put his boot on the sled, and stared her down.

"I thought you were better than this, Emily," he chided her. Garrlan respected her. She was a crack shot and a good teacher for it, but this was different. He was a military man, bred to obey orders. Her lackadaisical attitude and her unwillingness to comply with a lawful command did not sit well with him.

"I'm not. *Get out of my karking way,*" Emily said with finality, her hands dropping quietly to her sides behind the hoversled where they couldn't quite be seen.

"No can do. Orders are orders and insubordination will not be tolerated." Kharoc said as he stared her down sternly.

"I'm not a soldier, damnit!" she yelled - in the next instant, the hands concealed behind the crate on the sled revealed both of her pistols, aimed directly at both of their heads before they could react. She was a good liar, both with her hands and her words. Enough to distract them. Kharoc was already halfway to his sidearm the second he saw the draw - but it was still just a moment too late.

"Another inch and I blow both your brains out," Emily told them with every ounce of sharpness in her tongue. "I don't want to do it. I don't want to be here any more. I don't *want* to shoot you. I don't belong here. Just *let me go,* damnit."

The fury in her eyes couldn't be denied. Both men shared a glance for a moment. As they came to a silent agreement, they parted, allowing the mercenary to pass. The tension in the air, thick as it was, deflated as she quietly holstered both of her weapons and pushed her sled towards the shuttle, not even taking a moment to look up at them or even say one last word to them. It was taking all of her strength to maintain her composure, let alone push what was left of her tattered life up the ramp.

One minute later, the shuttle lifted off the *Nighthawk's* deck and veered down towards Selen. The two men watched her go, the last two Shadesworn to see Emily Hune in her time in service to Arcona. As far as the Shadow Clan cared, it was not betrayal, it was the end of a contract, thanks to her mental instability. She was no longer capable of service to Arcona - mercenaries so inclined could not be kept on retainer.. That was how Shawn had already decided to put this down in his report. A report to be backed up and co-signed by Major Garrlan, out of an act of kindness on both their parts. They had seen someone not hardened by the harsh realities of war crack under the pressure of losing someone extremely important to them. It was better just to let her go

Both quietly wondered if they would react the same way.

Once Emily reached Selen, she found the first civilian starship on the way out of the system, paid a handsome amount of credits to divert him to the Naboo system. All she wanted now was to go home.

As that ship slipped quietly into hyperspace, it was then that the tears she had held in for so long flowed freely, in the deathly silence of hyperspace - where nobody else could see them. That was the cost of her loyalty to her friend. That was the cost of everything she had held dear. Now, she had nothing and nowhere to go but her family home. She had to rebuild her life from

the start. That would not be an easy task, but it had to be done. What other choice did she have?

Loyalty. Friendship. Duty. Service. The cost of the sins of the past. The cost of everything that held Arcona together.