

The Frontlines:
A Toast!

Iron Tavern
Eos City
38 ABY

Hapune Ning - or Zith'apune'laning, as was her now estranged family name - was cleaning a leaning tower of glasses behind the bar of the Iron Tavern. The tavern had become quieter as of late, in part due to the raging conflict outside the city borders. Hapune would have preferred a day off, or at least a warning, before being sent on her shift. Now, the swirls of her towel as she wiped down chalice after chalice were accentuated by the crackles of gunfire, the rumble of walkers and tanks, and the occasional Wilhelm-ish scream.

She tried to ignore it. A few Brotherhood soldiers had actually slipped into the establishment, and surprisingly, they were willing to fork over credits for drinks. Hapune assumed that the poor saps needed one last shot and “oorah!” before they had to return to the chaos only a half mile away. Outside, the streets were mostly empty, save for the occasional troop of droids or defensive forces scrambling to keep the peace. Most residents, if they were sane, remained inside.

One sergeant, his uniform dirty and sweat staining his brow, approached the bar for another round. He plunked down his glass and heaved himself onto a stool, sighing. An R3 astromech droid swiveled and warbled by his feet.

Hapune glimpsed the insignia on his jacket. “What clan are you from?” she asked.

The soldier looked up at her, revealing lines of weariness criss-crossing his face like a tapestry. His voice came out low and gravelly. “Arcona,” he replied.

“Cool,” she replied, absorbing the answer but not really comprehending it. She picked up a bottle of wine the man was gesturing at and refilled his stein.

“Yeah, it’s rough out there,” he rasped. “Big let the medical staff retreat a bit and get our bearings. She doesn’t know we’re here.”

He pointed to the gaggle of other soldiers wearing Arcona insignia, their faces nearly submerged in their ales. The R3 unit chirped a bit more.

“Medical folks, huh?” mumbled Hapune. “I almost got into that myself. ‘Til I wound up here.”

“Yeah,” grunted the Arconan. “What’s a Chiss like you tending bar instead of going all Thrawn out there?”

Ouch, thought Hapune, cringing. The stereotypes ran rampant, she supposed. She got back to cleaning glasses after the man forked over a fistful of credits.

“Yeah,” she said aloud. “I get that question a lot. My dad was a colonel in the Chiss Defense Fleet. I was never the military type. I like...making stuff, y’know?”

“Yeah, I hear you.” The man raised his glass. “A toast to you, my dear.”

Hapune chuckled, just before the rumbling started.

It seemed very distant at first, but the volume swelled like air in one’s throat. The Chiss paused her cleaning and cocked her head to one side almost comically, like a puzzled hound. Meanwhile, the soldiers in the bar had all stirred from their newfound drunkenness and looked adequately alarmed. The man who had been speaking to her jumped off the stool and placed his hand on the butt of his pistol, his R3 companion screeching loudly.

One of the other Arconans, a Zabrak, pointed at the doorway.

“Is...*is that an AT-AT?*”

He was answered by the entire front of the tavern being reduced to rubble, the doorway now merely being a gigantic hole. Sure enough, an enormous walker hovered outside, and as the hatch opened, a very tall and seemingly very inebriated Epicanthix hopped out, whooping as she landed clumsily on her feet.

“*Wooooo!*” she crowed. “Biggs, Wedge, thanks for the ride! Now, wait here!”

“Our names are Kork and Grapp!” a small voice emerged from the walker, just before the hatch closed.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” the gigantic woman muttered, waving the thing off dismissively. Then, with all the pomp and pride of a peacock with a sprained foot, she strode into the bar, approached the gawking Chiss, and slapped both hands down on the bar. “So! I heard you got a stock of Whyren’s back there.”

Hapune blinked, unsure what to say. The Arconans all exchanged befuddled glances.

“Um,” said the bartender. “Yeah. The Council likes it stocked.”

“Oooh, very good. *Very* good,” chuckled the woman, rubbing her hands together. “In that case, you’ve got two minutes to bring all the crates out before I gouge out both your eyes with my lightsaber.”

“Hey, you’re the Dread Lord of Plagueis!” an Arconan suddenly cried out. “You’re not supposed to be using Brotherhood resources to ransack - ”

He was silenced by sudden electrocution, as the “Dread Lord” aimed her organic hand at him and eagerly zapped him with purple lightning. As he groaned and sizzled, the woman turned her attention back to the Chiss.

“Ahem. Anyway. My whiskey?”

Hapune was more than happy to oblige. It took time, but she managed to lug all six crates of Whyren’s from the backroom to the bar, and the Dread Lord eagerly stacked them. She then pressed a button on the commlink hooked onto her bar and spoke quickly.

“Aleister, this is Ronovi. I’ve got the stuff. You get Biggs and Wedge back over to help take it back.”

The voice of “Aleister” could be heard faintly crackling from the commlink. “Aren’t their names Kork and Grapp?”

“I know what their names are!” “Ronovi” barked. “Just get it done, all right?”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

Ronovi groaned before taking the stool that had been vacated by the Arconan med-soldier, ignoring the shrill protests of the R3 unit. She unhooked a flask from her utility belt, took a swig from it, sighed, and leaned a very cybernetic arm on the counter.

“So, beautiful,” she slurred, “what’s the big idea of you working in a war zone?”

Hapune didn’t know what to say. Somehow, oddly enough, she was somewhat attracted to this dark-haired Amazon woman. Even the eyepatch and the fact that she was essentially rubbing her bar of stock didn’t bother her. “You know,” she griped. “Boss is a jerk. He wants profit.”

“That’s stupid,” chuckled Ronovi. “How about you take a long cigarra break and don’t come back?”

Her AT-AT pilots had returned, shoving past still stunned Arconans and lugging the heavy crates out of the tavern. At this point, Ronovi patted the empty stool beside her, and the Chiss realized that she wanted her to sit with her. Why not? The world was ending, and nothing mattered. Hapune snagged a can of ale, leapt over the bar with grace, and sat right beside Ronovi.

“Don’t tell anyone you saw me here, all right?” Ronovi whispered. “I’ve got a reputation to uphold. I snagged that walker from a Naga Sadow base right under their noses. I think they were drunker than I was.”

She laughed loudly, then extended her hand. “I’m Ronovi Tavisæn. You?”

“Hapune Ning.”

“Pretty name for a pretty girl.”

“I appreciate the compliment.”

“Probably smart as heck, too,” continued Ronovi. “You know about Plagueis?”

“Yeah. One of the clans, right? My brother’s on Aliso.”

“No kidding!” the Dread Lord gasped. “Do you visit?”

“Sometimes.” Hapune grins. “He works at the Sand Pit. Gets to see all the fights.”

“Bartenders in the family. Your parents must have been mortified.”

“Definitely,” snickered Hapune.

“Like my parents,” said Ronovi. “My dad was a mechanic. My mom stayed at home. I went out fighting and became a Sith. Crazy stuff, right?”

“Yep. Pretty crazy.”

The boys had packed up the booze, but Ronovi held up a finger as one began to talk to her. “You take that stuff back. I’m busy. I’ll snatch up a speeder I saw outside.”

They did not argue with her. This left the two women to chat. They discussed childhoods, ridiculous

stories, favorite holo-novels, even sushi. Hapune was impressed by all the carnage Ronovi had caused. She did love a beefy girl who knew how to slaughter.

After a half hour of sipping ale, drinking whiskey, and heavily flirting, Ronovi's commlink burst back to life. Hapune could hear Aleister's voice again, small and tinny.

"Headmaster, you may wanna head back. Liandry's asking about you."

"Damn," groaned Ronovi. "So soon?"

"Have fun," giggled Hapune.

Ronovi raised her flask to her - another toast. "To the frontlines!" she crowed.

Then, to both Hapune's shock and hidden delight, the Epicanthix jumped off her stool, grabbed the Chiss, and dipped her into a passionate kiss. Hapune's blue skin was tinged with red as they pulled away, her lips tingling pleasantly.

"Meet me at the Sand Pit," murmured Ronovi, before she left the bar with a skip in her step.

As she disappeared, the Arconan slightly cooked from Force lightning shouted: "*Ma'am*, this is the *Iron Tavern!*"