

A Horn In A Haystack

Epilogue
Mune Cinteroph (3607)



To the sands
They came
Following rumours
To save a crewmate
A friend
A brother in arms
A brother.

And so
In their wake
Blood and carnage
Death and destruction
War on the sand
Enemy massacred
Defeated.

They infiltrated deep
A mother felled
A child left alone in the world
And struck
By their fury
Regret and uncertainty.

Still,
They moved forward
And victory hard-won
But at what cost?

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The darkness stretched out in all directions. Through the dark, they could feel the press of cold stone walls, floor and ceiling. All around them, the weight of the tunnel pressed in, suffocating, enclosing, like some dank tomb waiting to seal them in for an eternity of cold all-consuming blackness. It was a thing alive, waiting to engulf them, to devour them and thrust their existence to the unfeeling void of nothingness. Their heart raced, pulse trembling violently with the terror that obliterated all logical thought. Their nose was clogged by the cloying scent of fresh blood and older perfumes of old sewers, water left to stagnate and other unmentionable things.

Where are the others? Mune threw their senses outwards, trying to grasp at any presence they could in the dark. Emptiness stretched out in all directions. They sensed no others there in the darkness. Their panic escalated. Mune desperately looked around for Ruka, for Zig, for Sully or Doon, anyone. All was blackness—a thick impenetrable gloom.

They opened their mouth to call out, but no sound came forth. They tried again, but their voice abandoned them. Shaking violently in fear, they managed to take a step forward. Their foot caught on something, and they fell, landing hard on something soft yet firm. Hesitantly, they explored the object, hands exploring what they could identify only as some kind of fabric. It took Mune only another moment to recognize that it was a body, cold and unmoving, upon the floor. They gasped and yelped and fell back on their tail, the shock of pain making them cry out, finding their voice and with it, shapes in the dark stood out in nightmarish silhouettes. Bodies, everywhere. Their brain did what anyone's brain would try to hide the details of what they saw right then.

Mune knew, though.

Then the ceiling gave, and sand engulfed it all.

Mune woke to the sound of screaming. Sitting bolt upright, they realized within a few seconds that they were the one screaming. Their fur matted with cold sweat, heart racing violently in their chest. They stopped screaming, lungs struggling for air, mind trying to sort itself out as the images only just began to fade. A shaking hand came up to brush their muzzle to find the fur there matted by tears. With a long exhalation, they fell back against their sweat-drenched sleeping mat.

"Mune, you know full well you cannot..."

"Caleb! You do not... you... I..." Mune fumbled for words.

They were back in their quarters on the Voidbreaker II, a line open to their husband's communicator. Mune paced back and forth behind their desk. Their tail lashed about, their ears down. They had been out of sorts since arriving back at the ship. Mune had not been the only one either. Ruka was displeased. Mune reflected on the bodies in the sand. They saw Sulith's hammer pulverizing the enemy's head right in front of them. The Togorian had saved them; of that, they had no doubt.

"Mune. You all did what had to be done," Caleb tried again.

"I... agree in some cases, but... You were not here. The boy... we..." Mune shuddered at the memory.

"You've been here more than once. It is one of the things I love about you, that you are no killer. That you feel..." Caleb sighed into the comm, "But, from what I am hearing, all actions were those of a team defending itself."

"We invaded their territory... *they* were the ones defending themselves."

Mune swallowed hard, their pacing ceasing. They were the invading force. They were the ones charging into enemy territory. Did it matter that they were there to save one of their own? Was it necessary to use as much force as they did? Could they not have opened up dialogue, negotiated their way to having Karran released to them.

"Mune..."

"I know!" Mune took a deep and steadying breath and tried again, softer, "I know, Caleb. I am sorry, I just."

"Sometimes, it is necessary, Mune. Whether you like it or not," Caleb's voice came soft, patient. "In the heat of battle, it is killed or be killed. There is not always time to stop and think; *I wonder if I can maim them before they put a bullet in my brain.*"

"You know..."

"Do not dare use visions and seeing ahead or whatever as an excuse to tear yourself apart," Caleb cut off the Shista sharply. "All it takes is one slip and... I'd lose you. The thought alone terrifies me."

Mune finally sat down with a heavy sigh. "I am sorry."

"I am not asking you, nor have I ever asked you to be a killer. It is not you. You are no assassin. I do ask that you come back to me alive and if that means some bad guys had to die..." Caleb growled, "So be it."

"Just like that?"

"I am a cold and... if anything... practical bastard, Mune. You are well aware of that."

"So matter of fact of you," Mune tapped a claw on the desk surface.

"It is a fact. A cold hard fact."

"A kid is an orphan because of us," Mune noted, the thought revolting to them.

"Battle has a way of producing orphans. It is an unattended side-effect of claiming lives. Responsibility was taken, which is more than most could ever claim, and a home was found for the young one. I have to say... Scholae would never have stopped and taken the time..."

"You are not wrong. We fought how many battles with them? Never did any of them stop to reflect on the destruction left in their wake." Mune sighed, "As Director of Imperial Scholae Intelligence..."

"You had to deal with the truth where others could just step over the bodies," Caleb finished. "It is different here. These people feel."

Mune thought about it. They stared at their hand where it rested on their desk. The itch of sand they thought they had washed away wholly nagged at them. The ship was well beyond Tatooine now, heading homeward with their crewmate rescued. The mission had been a success. They sighed and sat up straighter, "You're right."

"Of course I am. I am sorry that the night terrors are back. I promise I'll return to you as soon as I can."

"I can be alone, you know...."

"I know. You can be, but why should you be when you can be in my arms?"

"I love you," Mune said softly.

"I love you too, my Sun and Moon," Caleb responded in Shistavanen.

"Do hurry back; I believe Cora has that ice cream social planned."

"I would not miss it."

The connection closed. With a sigh, Mune rose and grabbed their spare sheets to change those on the sleeping mat. They doubted sleep would come to them again any time soon but, mind a little more at ease after speaking to Caleb; they could try.

