

A Night In The Bastion

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CHAPTER ONE - THE DRUNKEN BASTION

When Imperial citizens think about Star Destroyers, they never think about what it takes to keep one running. They whisper to one another, in awe of the size of these vessels, the strength of their shields, the pure malevolent capability of the heavy turbolaser batteries. Engineers talk about the I-A2B solar ionization power system, while romantics talk about seeing the galaxy and the honor of protecting it from terrorist threats. Even Rebels - when they dare to talk about the Empire at all - they speak of the fear that strikes their very souls when an Imperial Star Destroyer enters orbit, giving the backbones of the Imperial Navy the respect they deserve even as they wage their petty war against law and order.

Whether citizens, engineers, romantics, or Rebels, the one thing people *don't* think about is the logistics. They don't wonder about the galleys, or the heads. They don't think about the berthing spaces where thousands of crew sleep, or the maintenance bays where everything from TIE fighters to gonk droids are repaired. They certainly don't think about the recreational spaces, where crew members go to relax. And even among the crews of these massively powerful ships, almost no one thinks about the doors.

But doors, thought Lieutenant Colonel Narwen Task, Wing Commander of Wing I on the Imperial Star Destroyer *Hammer*, *might be the best indicator of how well a ship is maintained.*

The sensor picked up his presence a few paces away, and machinery clicked and whirred audibly as the door began to retract into the ceiling. The sounds of a happily inebriated crew spilled out into the corridor as he patiently waited for the door to fully open. In that brief moment, he mused on a conversation he had many years ago, when one of his old peers from the Naval Academy explained to him these doors were designed this way on purpose.

In the event a section of the ship took damage or lost power, a single crewmember could close this type of door using nothing but a manual lever. The ship's artificial gravity would pull the door down easily enough, and it would provide a nearly perfect atmospheric seal in an emergency hull breach. Moreover, in the admittedly unlikely event that a defensive posture needed to be assumed by the crew, the weight of the door made it difficult for invaders to lift, and it was virtually impossible to "blow" the door from its tracks.

This door in particular was well maintained (*as it should be*) though noticeably slower than the newer Imperial design. It bore a stylized version of the *Hammer* command logo, atop a circle made by the smaller logos of the squadrons stationed on board, with a large empty space in the middle. A standard work order was neatly centered on the door, its text informing the reader that the renovations on this unused cargo bay had been approved by the Commodore, and listing the stages of improvement with initials beside each completed item. The only thing remaining on the itemized list was "logo approval," for this work order to be completed and removed, which would be followed by the "official" opening of the premier crew recreational facility on the Imperial Star Destroyer *Hammer*, the Drunken Bastion.

Unofficially open for the last several weeks, the Bastion had quickly become the most popular place for crew members throughout the ship to go in off-duty hours to relax and socialize. When command approval for the renovation work came through the crew, led by Captain Ward "Black Ranger" Anders, *insisted* on installing a door of this particular design. This older model was less likely to jam, and that was a big deal to the crew who claimed this door was a vital part of the design. Task was inwardly amused by their hard stance on this specific door, but by his reckoning it was a valid point.

If this door didn't work properly, there would be no end to the drunken concussions and pursuant medical paperwork. The after-action report from the ill-fated "Death Star" mentioned poor maintenance as a factor in its destruction at the hands of the Rebels, and privately Task was willing to bet the late Grand Moff Tarkin's disdain for the day-to-day operations of his command played a larger factor in that tragedy than anything those ragtag Rebels did.

Task walked through the door into the Drunken Bastion, and the raucous noise level fell as though a switch had been flipped. Vaguely familiar voices floated in the space, quietly urging one another to silence with, "shhhh, the Taskmaster is here..." and he caught the incredulity in someone's not-quite-whispered, "what is *he* doing *here*", but the dim lighting made it impossible to determine who was speaking. Deeper within the bar music continued unabated, blaring from speakers mounted above the dance floor. He could actually *feel* the music in the subsonic vibrations of the floor, an unfamiliar rhythm under his feet. No doubt the latest style from some hedonistic Core world, Task didn't care for it. But then, he didn't care for much of anything that distracted him from his mission. In fact, he would prefer to spend his time poring over the telemetry data from the latest round of simulations. Beta, Delta, and Lambda squadrons had all been very enthusiastic about testing the new hull, laser, and repair components, and there were stacks of datapads to go through. He had been given a direct order, however, and couldn't very well ignore it.

Deciding that the best course of action would be to ignore the patrons of the Drunken Bastion and find someone with some sort of responsibility, Task made a direct line for the

bar. The door quietly slid back into place behind him, and with that universal signal the crew resumed their activities as though he had never crossed the threshold. As long as he paid them no mind, the crew would not interrupt him.



The droid behind the bar was cleverly designated H0-P5, pet project of the Hammer crew. His legs and torso sections were from a nanny droid used by the upper crust of Coruscanti elite, bipedal with four lifelike arms patterned after the human female. Liberating the droid from some Rebel sympathizers on Lothal resulted in the destruction of its original head and processor unit, so Captain Anders somehow "appropriated" a head from an old K2 unit, and Captain Demaroo'achyyk (or "Cheeks," as his friends called him) scrounged up a central processor from an assassin droid. The processor had been in a small box in a storage bay for years - along with most of the rest of the IG model - after it made an unfortunate remark about a bounty in Naboo which resulted in Lord Vader tearing the droid limb from limb.

The reprogrammed IG-9X unit had extraordinary processing power, and H0-P5 could make any of over a thousand different drinks from across the galaxy, faster than any person alive. This was necessary to keep up with the ever-thirsty *Hammer* crew. This processing power came at a cost, however; H0-P5 was endlessly pessimistic and would be considered clinically depressed by an Imperial psychologist, if one could be convinced to treat a droid.

"I don't have anything strong enough to make you forget *your* troubles, Wing Commander Task," the droid's curious, dry tone wasn't lost on him. "Perhaps the medical bay would be amenable to a lobotomy?"

Task didn't find H0-P5 the slightest bit funny, but then he wasn't sure if the droid was joking. Someone had programmed the bartender's vocoder with a masculine Imperial accent, but it had a distinct nasal quality, with drawn out vowels and a mild sibilance that made *everything* the droid said sound sarcastic.

"I'm not here to drink, you scrap pile. High Admiral Plif believes he left his credit card here after the... festivities last night. Have you seen it?"

The red jewel embedded in H0-P5's upper chest pulsed as the droid considered how to reply to both insult and question. Thousands of responses were formulated and rejected in a fraction of a second, until the proper response was selected. The bartender crossed his upper pair of arms while the lower pair wiped down the bar.

"Of course I've seen it. I've seen it a number of times since my activation. The High Admiral likes it here, you know. Must be my extraordinary conversational skills. The card is a standard Imperial Credit Storage Datapad, 85 millimeters wide by 55 millimeters tall, with a thickness of approximately 1 millimeter. It bears a holographic image of the High Admiral's face on the upper left quadrant, and beneath that is a series of embossed numbers that my programming will not allow me to repeat out loud. Does that help, Wing Commander?"

The droid drew the title out in a protracted enunciation, as if to remind Task of his responsibilities. The jewel, once a soothing green piece intended to resemble jewelry, had been replaced by the *Hammer* crew and now glowed a steady, malevolent red. Combined with the slight tilt of the K2 head that had been fitted to H0-P5's body, Task was *sure* the droid was laughing at him. He quickly looked around to see if he had an audience; it appeared that the patrons of the bar were intent on paying attention to something else, a sure indicator that everyone was in fact listening in.

"Listen, droid. You know *exactly* what I meant when I asked if you had seen it, so don't play coy with me!" Task found himself growing angry with the impertinence from this unlikely collection of parts, and his patience was wearing thin. "When was the last time you saw the card, and precisely where was it?"

The bartender droid's head tilted thoughtfully as he uncrossed his upper arms, bringing one hand up to tap on the side of the polished black dome, in a gesture that could only have been programmed into the droid intentionally.

"The last time I saw High Admiral Plif's Imperial credit card, I was handing it to Solohan, after ringing up several hundred credits' worth of drinks. He scampered off with it, assuring me he would return it to the High Admiral. Now, if you would be so kind as to step aside, *sir*."

Task was not kind. He wasn't particularly cruel, either. He was known to care immensely about the pilots in his Wing and the equipment they used, and he was relentless in the pursuit of perfection. That's how he came to earn the nickname "Taskmaster," though he didn't approve of it. He was determined to get to the bottom of the events of last night, to locate the missing card, but clearly the droid wasn't going to be much help.

Task stepped back, away from the bar, and decided he would next find the... being... who was last seen with the card, Captain Solohan of Lambda Squadron. Now it was just a matter

of finding the pilot and questioning him. He'd have this issue resolved and be back to his office and the reports within a matter of hours.

CHAPTER TWO - SOLOHAN

Several thirsty crew members, blissfully unaware of the Wing Commander's entrance or the interrogation, had swarmed the bar for service. H0-P5 swiveled his hips away in what Task considered a highly inappropriate, almost suggestive manner, and began taking orders, but then paused. Tilting his head to the side again, he turned to face the front of the bar.

"Well, speak of the Sith. What did I tell you about dragging yourself up here like that? And so soon after last night? Such a *brave* little Ewok."

As the bartender spoke, sharp claws gouged the wroshyr wood bartop, and a diminutive shape hauled itself up directly in front of the mixing station. Captain Solohan glared at the droid and chittered a rapid-fire string of expletives in his native Ewokese. Task, pleased that he wouldn't have to go in search of the pilot, didn't appreciate the tone or understand what was being said. Clearly H0-P5 did, however, and the droid was decidedly unimpressed. His lower arms, now busy making drinks, didn't so much as pause as his upper left hand reached out and thumped the furry Ewok on the nose.



With an absurd squawk, the surprised pilot fell backwards and onto the floor. His cohort howled with laughter as he scrambled to his feet, dusting himself off in an absolute rage, and their laughter followed him as he stormed towards the exit. Task noted that the door opened rather quickly, and only high enough to allow the Ewok to pass without being forced to stoop. He noted it and filed his observations away to be investigated later; right now he needed this pilot to turn over the High Admiral's credit card.

"Captain Solohan! Lambda Flight Leader, report!"

Task bellowed, using what he liked to call his "hangar bay voice," and the Imperial Ewok froze in the corridor, door still halfway open. The pilots of the Hammer may call him "The Taskmaster" and joke around incessantly, but they knew that tone and what it portends.

The furious pilot plodded back into the Drunken Bastion, black eyes nearly glowing with anger and embarrassment. He stopped in front of Task and stood tall - for an Ewok - and barked in a high pitched and curiously accented voice.

"Sir, yub sir!"

"I am under direct orders from High Admiral Plif himself, to recover his misplaced credit card, and the droid here says *you* were the last... pilot... to have it in your possession. Do you have it?"

The pause was unintentional. The Imperial Navy as it existed when Task joined was highly xenophobic, but in the intervening years had relaxed considerably and even encouraged enlistment from nonhuman species. To his credit, Task wasn't particularly biased against nonhumans, but he wasn't sure he'd ever get used to them in service.

"No, sir." The high pitched voice was clear enough but hard to take seriously, a problem Solohan had with many people. "H0-P5 gave me the card, and I had every intention of safeguarding it for the High Admiral, but there was chalquilla at the bar... Then the dancers showed up... I didn't know they were going to be Twi'leks, sir!"

Captain Solohan, the one and only Ewok in service to the Empire, was infamous for his devotion to the women of Ryloth. Perhaps it was something to do with their head-tails, or the virtual rainbow of hues their skin could take on. Personally, Task was quite confident Solohan's obsession had more to do with their generally uninhibited sexuality than physical appearance factors, but he hadn't ruled out pheromones playing a significant part in this obsession. Ewok noses tend to be much more sensitive than human, perhaps even as sensitive as Bothans. In any case, it was a poor excuse and the Taskmaster had little patience for it.

"Your excuses and escapades are of no interest to me, *Captain*. You are a fine pilot, with all the discipline required to survive and even persevere in numerous starfighter battles. I expect - no, *demand* - better from you. Perhaps some escort duty will reinforce your sense of responsibility. You and the rest of your wing in Lambda will make sure our friends on the *Challenger*, *Warrior*, and *Avenger* have a ready supply of zuccquilla on hand... just in case."

Solohan's attempt at military bearing slowly eroded and his composure darkened as Task spoke. He was still embarrassed by the events that transpired months ago, and being reminded of them by the Wing Commander in that detached, clinical way stung worse than the ribbing of his squadmates.

The other Star Destroyers had reported no unusual activity, but material goods and personnel were constantly flowing from one ship to another as needed. Without an

infected Ewok to bite crewmembers, another "Ewokalyapse" was unlikely to occur on the sister ships, but Task was meticulous and preferred to leave nothing to chance.

Lieutenant Colonel Task glanced at the chronometer on his wrist, then back down his nose to meet the Ewok eye-to-eye.

"You have approximately eight hours before the mission briefing in ready room three. Gather your wingmates and get some rest. You are not to come back here until after the mission, and *that* is a direct order. Do I make myself clear, Captain?"

Solohan, clearly struggling to regain his bearing, stood at something resembling attention. He saluted the Wing Commander, and held it as he replied, "yub nub, SIR!" Without waiting for the salute to be returned, he dropped his furry paw and performed an about-face, intent on gathering his squad mates, no more or less than ordered.

"Oh, before you go Captain, one more question."

Task watched as a ridge of fur along the Ewok's spine raised, the involuntary hackles a remnant of his genetic ancestry. He knew that pushing Solohan much further would result in an altercation, a flurry of fangs and fur that would likely end with him in the infirmary and the Ewok in the brig. Regardless, the question had to be asked, so he persisted.

"If you don't have the High Admiral's card with you, perhaps you can recall for me the last time you saw it? Is it, by any chance, tucked away in a headscarf somewhere?"

Solohan turned once again, irritation warring with forced composure in his body language and expression. He knew the Wing Commander was pushing his buttons but refused to take the bait. He had to speak through clenched jaws, but he replied as professionally as he could manage.

"I don't know if you ever noticed, sir, but Ewoks don't have pockets. My people wear head coverings to honor the mighty Hexprath, who showed us how to protect ourselves from the rains of Ilbath; otherwise our bodies are as the gods made us. Even wearing the flight suit diminishes me, but I make *that* sacrifice willingly. I took the card from H0-P5 but I don't remember much after that, and I definitely don't remember losing it. So it must have happened somewhere between the bar... and the ladies... Sir."

It truly was remarkable to Task how the tension in the Ewok's body language ebbed as he recalled his Twi'lek companions from the night before.

"Very well Captain, you are dismissed." The Ewok pivoted once more and padded his way out of the Drunken Bastion. His anger, a moment ago muted by his incomplete but

pleasant recollection of the previous evening, simmered under his thick fur. Solohan managed to get through the door and into the corridor before the ranting started. Had the Lieutenant Colonel been in the hallway, he may have reconsidered his earlier words; as it was an empty hallway, no one heard Captain Solohan, the "Empire's Ewok," raging into the empty space.

"On Endor we would have EATEN you!"

CHAPTER THREE - WOLVE EXCELSIOR BERKANA

The Drunken Bastion had filled up with crew members (*and select guests*) during the exchange between the Wing Commander and Captain Solohan. Task noted an increase in the general noise level, and there was some sort of altercation taking place near the dance floor. As the highest-ranking officer in the bar, he knew he had an obligation to check out and quell the disturbance, even if it slowed down his investigation. He resigned himself to settling some sort of dispute between drunken crewmembers, and strode purposefully towards the back of the space, where he could hear at least two distinct arguments taking place.

Task wasn't sure what to expect as bar patrons parted in front of him like Tibanna gas clouds before a hapless prospector, but he was definitely not prepared to see an Ithorian having two distinct arguments with two different people... at once.

Lieutenant Commander Wolve Excelsior Berkana was *at least* as unusual as Captain Solohan. An Ithorian in volunteer service to the Empire, he hailed from a long line of Ithorian traders and diplomats. His parents negotiated trade agreements all along the Outer Rim, mediated peace talks between long-warring factions, and even helped the Rebels at one point to arrange accommodations for a captured prisoner on a planet sympathetic to their misguided "cause."

During that last negotiation, his family ship was hit by "friendly" Rebel fire and was forced to attempt a landing planetside. That sequence of events ended in a fireball that left everyone but him and the prisoner dead. The prisoner to be exiled was a ranking member of the Obsidian Temple, too valuable to be killed but too dangerous to keep in a Rebel facility. He pulled the freshly molted (*and badly wounded*) adolescent Ithorian from the wreckage when he could have fled, saving the child's life at great risk to his own. He then spent the next few weeks fending for them both, finding adequate food and water, building a makeshift shelter, and explaining the history of House Berkana as the Ithorian youth recovered from his wounds. The broken skull bones mended more slowly than the rest of

his injuries, but by the time he was fully healed he was ready to ask for admission into House Berkana, to serve the Empire and avenge the death of his family.

The decision to abandon a life of pacifism wasn't easy for an Ithorian. He gave up the name he was given at birth and adopted the name of the most vicious predator on this unnamed planet in a symbolic gesture, severing all ties with his past. How he got off that prison planet is unknown, but Wolve had shown a real talent for combat in flight, and scored highly in every aptitude test and simulator mission during his entry exams for the Academy. As he progressed in rank, he became known for his willingness to take on solo missions, and was more often in the cockpit of his TIE/LN than in his rack. There was a small matter of creating a helmet to fit him, but once that was accomplished, there were few that could compare to him in dedication. It was whispered among the crew that he was searching for the ship that was responsible for the life-altering crash from so long ago.

Ithorians are a well-known species in the galaxy, with a history going back over a dozen millennia. They are rather unique in the galaxy in that their language can only be spoken in stereo from both mouths, a mellifluous language that is difficult for many species to understand. Even protocol droids have difficulty processing Ithorian speech, except when equipped with binaural receptors, and cannot *speak* the language unless equipped with dual vocoders. The miniaturized translators carried by affluent Ithorians were prohibitively expensive, due to their technological requirements, so they were an infrequent sight.

As a result, most Ithorians learn to understand and speak Basic and elect to use the galactic language when in mixed company. The practical upshot of this is that they are capable of sustaining two conversations at once, as Wolve was doing when Task approached. As a courtesy, most Ithorians chose to use two different vocal tones to help people focus on which voice was speaking. Wolve thought it much funnier to use the same voice for both mouths. Task walked up to the booth the Ithorian used for his equipment just as one of the two arguments concluded. His command of the language was excellent but he spoke quietly in a very low register, almost sub-bass.

"Ahhhhh, Taskmaster. Yes, I'd heard *[no, idiot, over here!]* you were here. What can I *[put that down right here, as I told you!]* do for you today?"

It took some getting used to, parsing the relevant voice from the side conversation. Task struggled every single time Wolve pulled this stunt, and suspected (*correctly*) that he did it on purpose just to get under the Wing Commander's skin.

"How many times must I tell you that you are to address me by my rank, title, or proper name? Do not make me repeat myself again, Lieutenant Commander."

Wolve's head swayed as he shrugged, a surprisingly elegant mannerism he picked up from somewhere. Task knew that was the closest he'd get to an acknowledgement, so he moved on.

"I've got a set *[fine, fine, whatever. Just check the settings again]* to prepare for, Wing Commander. These people won't *[no, that plug goes there, do I have to do it all myself?]* dance on their own, and no dancing means a bunch of drunk crew looking for trouble. You don't want *[you've got to be kidding me, just go away, I'll do it myself!]* the crew getting into trouble, especially after last night, do you?"

Task knew his frustration was showing. It did every single time he spoke to the Ithorian; he had little respect for rank and crossed the line of proper conduct frequently. Just never *quite* far enough for a superior officer to take action. Of course, it never occurred to Task that no other superior officer had any complaints about the Ithorian pilot.

"You were here last night, playing music. Surely you saw what happened. Do you have any idea what may have happened to the High Admiral's credit card, or am I wasting my valuable time?"

Wolve's eyes locked onto Task, and he blinked first one eyelid, then the other. His friends would recognize that as equivalent to a human *(or near-human)* eye roll, but Task wasn't a friend and so didn't catch the significance of the insubordinate gesture.

"I don't *play* music, Task, I *make* music. For those sophisticated enough to recognize the difference. And that takes up nearly all of my *[careful with those colored lights, they're Alderaanian!]* attention. I started mixing and all these fine beings started dancing. Cheeks was really in the groove and everyone else was sort of following his lead. Next thing I know *[fine, just leave it, I'll take care of it when I'm done here]* there's an Ewok climbing all over the Wookiee, trying to break a bottle over his head and biting at people who try to pull him off."

He waved the helper off, apparently satisfied with the setup, and began arranging things carefully on the DJ station to his liking. Task had his complete attention for mere moments before another helper arrived, carrying a tray of small bowls. He continued his discussion with Task and began another with this new assistant.

"Kebela tried to step in and went flying, one of those handsy enlisted guys got beat up by one of those cute little Twi-lek girls *[you call this yogurt?]*, and H0-P5 threatened to shoot everyone with those wrist lasers. Damned creepy if you ask me, *[no, yo-gurt. This doesn't even qualify as fermented bantha milk.]* watching that droid's hands just flop off like that. Then Elle showed up and started spraying stun bolts. Fried one of my amplifiers, in fact. Wildfire and Tim came in, *[Girl, this isn't fight school. Go tell that dome-headed sex toy that if he doesn't find real yogurt, I'll be spinning him on this table!]* still in uniform, and helped Elle get everyone restrained. She yelled at them for a few

minutes, then sent them off to be escorted to their racks, and I went back to my music. *[That card could literally be anywhere, good luck with that].* I don't know *[and I don't care]* what started it, but I suggest you talk to Kebla, or maybe Cheeks. I'd bet anything it had something to do with those *[shouldn't be here anyway]* Twi'lek women."

Task tugged on his uniform tunic, straightening phantom wrinkles, as he considered his response. He assumed his most Imperial stance.

"Very good, Lieutenant Commander. Your input has been noted, as has your impertinence and poor attitude. I shall be reporting this discussion to the Commodore. You are dismissed."

Wolve Excelsior Berkana blinked one eye, then the other.

"Please, go right ahead. Tell Vice Admiral Phoenix *Berkana* exactly what I said. *[Ilemme know how that works out for you].* Meanwhile, I have things to do here, so I guess you can either leave or not, *[Lieutenant Colonel].*"

Task stiffened as he realized his mistake. Turning precisely, he stalked away from the Ithorian DJ, and headed for the door. As he approached, he once again heard the machinery whirring and wheezing, as the door began to raise. Impatiently, he ducked his head to cut under the slow-moving door. The door sensor, seeing a shorter stature, paused exactly at the wrong time, and with an audible thwack, Lieutenant Colonel Narwen Task's forehead collided with the door.

The bar went absolutely silent for a very brief moment; even the music stopped, by chance or by design. Then, as if prompted, the entire bar erupted at once, hoots and howls mingled with genuine, unfettered laughter.

His face only slightly less red than the jewel on H0-P5's chest, Task slowly picked himself up from the ground and dusted off his uniform. In days long past, he may have rounded up every person who witnessed his... mishap... and assigned them some sort of arduous duty.

As it was, all he could do was wait for the door. Tapping his foot impatiently and did his best to ignore the still-chuckling bar patrons; the few seconds it needed to open fully felt interminable. When the door finally had safely retracted to well above the top of his head, he strode out into the corridor, desperately attempting to look at ease. He waited for the door to close behind him, then turned and ripped the work order off the door. Task pulled a pen from his breast pocket - a fine writing instrument hand-crafted by an exiled Correllian pensmith - and struck a line through the last item on the list. The logo could wait; this door needed serious maintenance, and so he wrote on the order, in neat Imperial script, "Repair or replace door. Does not function as designed." Initialing the sheet, he put it back on the

door with a satisfied sigh. A properly functioning door was vital to a properly functioning ship, after all. They may get a laugh now, but he would get his when they were forced to spend liberty time repairing their flawed door.

"Enough of this nonsense. Time to go see a pilot with responsibility and some respect." Task was speaking aloud, a sign of his frustration. He consulted a terminal set into an alcove to locate the next person he intended to interrogate, then set off down the corridor to the turbolifts. He would get answers.

CHAPTER FOUR _ KEBLAOMEGA

Narwen Task pulled out a chair, designed to accommodate human physiology, and sat down at the briefing room table directly opposite Beta Squadron's hottest pilot. Consistently able to outfly most of the *Hammer*, he was cool under pressure and seldom made mistakes. He was modest but confident, and those who underestimated him on the ground quickly changed their minds when he was at the yoke of his Interceptor.

Despite his lethality in the cockpit, he had a generally affable personality and was popular among the crew, with a sense of humour that was often self-deprecating to the benefit of his squad- and shipmates. Always willing to help struggling junior officers, he was also a qualified medical officer and could be relied on for a bit of hangover remedy or spacesickness pills. He liked to remind people that he was not in fact a doctor, but he was knowledgeable enough that most of the crew saw little distinction. Born and raised on Coruscant, and honours graduate at the Imperial Academy, he was a model pilot. The only unusual fact about him was that his given name and surname were combined into a singular name; friends called him "Kebla," but his service record and superiors knew him as Lieutenant Commander KeblaOmega. It was unknown where this naming convention originated but it was growing in popularity among the undercity folk.

Task admired KeblaOmega and expected great things from him. The Beta Squadron Wing Leader's sense of urgency and responsibility matched his own, and with his wife and child disappearing under mysterious circumstances, he had no known ties to anyone or anything except the Empire.

"So, Commander, how do you fit into the events of last night? What do you recall?"

Commander KeblaOmega took his time answering, considering his words carefully. Task approved; unlike the Ewok and the Ithorian, this officer understood the importance of speaking concisely, and wouldn't jerk him around. Kebla spoke, quietly.

"Well sir, I was actually heading to the gym when I heard Commander ElleOhh's comlink call for assistance in the new bar. I had just completed the mission to Nadiri and needed to warm up my muscles after being cramped in my Interceptor for so long. My plan was to run for a while, maybe do some climbing, then hit the refresher and get to filing all of my reports."

If Task had any complaints at all about this pilot, it was that he didn't prioritize his paperwork. Reports needed to be done when the mission was still fresh in the mind, not after scaling walls and running. But he admitted to himself, KeblaOmega was thorough in his reporting, so he allowed him to continue uninterrupted.

"I raced over to the Bastion, but I wasn't sure what Elle meant when she reported an 'altercation.' I got there and the door took its sweet time opening, so I ducked under it and into the space, and it was a madhouse. Off to one side, a Twi'lek girl was kicking an enlisted crewman, pretty savagely. I turned to look at the dance floor and..." he trailed off.

"Please continue, Commander, I already know what happened."

Kebla was glad he wasn't the first to relay the scene to the Taskmaster, because it was truly absurd. He still didn't know what caused it and would have thought someone was pulling his leg, had he not been there and seen it for himself.

"I turned to the dance floor, and Solohan was literally *riding* on Cheeks' shoulders, hitting the poor Wookiee over the head with a chalquilla bottle! Cheeks looked frantic, trying to get Solohan off of him, and I saw Elle shaking her head and charging her blaster. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, so I made the decision to try and break them up myself, sir."

Of course he did. KeblaOmega was a man of action, and he rarely made the wrong choice. Judging by his tone, Task knew he believed he had made an error this time.

"So I rushed over and leapt up to grab Solohan and pull him off of Cheeks. Unfortunately," Kebla actually looked sheepish, "I caught Cheeks' arm in mid-swing on my chest and went flying. Flew all the way across the dance floor in fact, and slammed into a group of off duty crewmen. Anyway, by the time I got untangled from them, Elle had stunned everyone. Pretty sure she got some of Wolve's gear too, he was making quite the fuss."

KeblaOmega privately thought Lieutenant Colonel Task was too stuffy, too sure of himself, and most importantly too wound up in doing things exactly "by the book." He thought Kebla was a model officer because he never bothered to actually read between the lines, never caught the subtle criticisms of his mission plans (like being stuck in an Interceptor for nearly 10 hours) or feedback on the excessive reporting requirements. Most importantly, he never flew anymore, and Kebla had little respect for a Wing Commander who gave up the

cockpit for the office chair. But he respected the title, if not the person, so he wrapped up his story with all the relevant details he could recall, which Task meticulously noted on his datapad. Kebla's friends knew him to be quite chatty, but only with people he liked. Task knew him to be concise and direct.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander, your insight will prove most useful as I continue this investigation."

Task approved of Commander KeblaOmega. That sentiment was not reciprocated, but there was no value in antagonizing him. And he didn't really need to know about the Twi'lek girl... it probably wasn't relevant, and he didn't ask anyway.

Kebla chuckled to himself as the Wing Commander left the ready room. As usual, he was conducting the search perfectly "by the book," but that was going to make things much more difficult for him in the long run. A little common sense would go a long way, but Task wasn't known for that, and Kebla sure wasn't going to teach him. He decided his paperwork could wait for a change; he'd heard that the Bastion had received a shipment of *Mandallian Narcolethe*, somehow arranged by Captain Anders, and he wanted to go sample some of it. Might make writing these reports less cumbersome. Or so he told himself.

CHAPTER FIVE - DEMAROO'ACHYYK [CHEEKS]

Wookiees are perhaps the best-known nonhuman aliens in the galaxy. They are large, furry, intelligent, and loyal almost to a fault. They're hard workers and physically stronger than most species. When a Wookiee decides to fight, few can compare with their ferocity, and they can single-handedly change the outcome of a battle. They also despise the Empire, generally speaking, a result of years of enslavement before the Empire outlawed the practice and freed everyone. This Wookiee was different from the average, however. He felt a need that all young male Wookiees feel, to prove himself, but perhaps to a greater extent than most. He sought out challenges and defeated them all, leading him to seek his fame and fortune in the Empire; the old ways were gone and they were eager to get him through basic training and flight school, where he exceeded every expectation. Sooner or later, he believed he would find a challenge he *couldn't* handle with ease, and the Empire seemed a valid path to that unknown. The Wookiee stood up from the comm station and stretched, then answered the door. It was kept locked except during turnover as a standard safety protocol, and he quickly keyed in the code provided by the stubby encryption droid. He was not surprised to see Lieutenant Colonel Narwen Task; he had been monitoring the Wing Commander's progress through the ship.

{"Please have a seat, Colonel Task. I will of course be happy to cooperate with your investigation, sir."}

Captain Demaroo'achyyk gestured to the empty seat across the desk and followed suit by settling into his own chair, an oversized standard Imperial design that barely accepted his large frame. It creaked ominously as he laced the fingers of his enormous paws together and gathered his thoughts. As with all space-faring Wookiees, he understood Basic perfectly well but lacked the physiological structures required to speak it. Rather than expecting everyone else to learn Shyriiwook, his native language, "Cheeks" had designed and built a droid translator. The microdroid, designated MNy-M3, didn't have a great deal of processing power or personality, but it did an adequate job of translating, and it was unobtrusive hanging from his bandolier. He designed it so that it would clip into his TIE helmet without a hassle, and it had an ornamental appearance that suited him, in his opinion.

{"I was there, but I wasn't paying attention to that little furball. Hard to pay attention to anything but the dance when the music hits your soul, Colonel."}

The Wookiee was known not just on the *Hammer* but throughout the entire TIE Corps for his love of music and dancing. Pilots who had flown his wing (*or flown against him in simulators*) even described his flying as a sort of dance, a description he treasured.

{"Have you been there when Wolve is in the groove? I don't care who you are, your feet just start moving whether you want them to or not."}

The range of human hearing was so limited, he was surprised they could even feel the basic rhythms, much less the nuance in the Ithorian DJ's mixes. Even so, nearly every species in the galaxy had some form of dance, and Cheeks reveled in it. Humans *could* dance and many of them did, even if they didn't hear the music properly, but Task certainly wasn't one of them.

"I'm not here to talk about music *or* dancing, Captain." Task had little patience for the Cheeks and his digressions, but even he knew better than to aggravate a Wookiee. "I need to know what happened last night, specifically with regard to the High Admiral's card."

Cheeks expelled a sigh, ruffling the paper reports and logbook on the desk that were awaiting transcription to the duty datapad.

{"I'm afraid I don't really know, Colonel. One minute, I'm shaking it to one of Wolve's amazing grooves, anticipating the moment when the beat drops, and the next minute I hear shouting that nearly drowns out the music. I looked over towards the source, near the booths, and saw Solohan drop kick one of the enlisted crewmen. I didn't want an

altercation to ruin the night, so I made my way over there and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck."}

Cheeks shook his head in amusement. He knew Task didn't understand the language of the Wookiees, and was therefore unaware of the liberties the little translator droid was taking with his story. Just as well, he thought. Task doesn't appreciate foul or suggestive language anyway.

{"I didn't expect the little guy to be so nimble, sir. I thought I had a good hold on him, but that Ewok was like a Kowakian monkey-lizard and before I even knew what was happening, he was basically riding my shoulders, with one hand tangled in my fur while he tried to break a bottle over my head!"}



His indignation audible despite the language barrier, the Wookiee reached up and grabbed a pawful of white fur. One hand clutching the distinctive streak he had earned while escaping from slavers, he mimed a clubbing motion with the other, and then threw his paws in the air.

{"So there I am, with an Ewok on my shoulders and attempting to club me, a couple of enlisted guys laughing at the scene, and one of those Twi'lek girls looking ready to commit murder and another slipping behind the bar. I spun around a couple of times, just trying to dislodge him, and he bit my ear!"}

The translator droid didn't quite capture the Wookiee's anger, but Cheeks made his point by roaring and thumping the duty desk and denting the thick metal surface. He quickly regained his bearing, and continued.

{"I tried to reach up and grab him, but somehow accidentally bumped Lieutenant Commander Kebbla, who was jumping in to help. He's a lot lighter than he looks, and I guess I knocked him down."}

What Cheeks actually said is that Kebla was sent flying several meters in the air, halfway across the dance floor and into a couple of watching crew members, who broke his fall. But Task didn't need those details, as far as MNY-M3 was concerned.

{“The next thing I remember is getting dizzy, and Solohan falling off me. I don't know exactly what happened but I woke up with my hands cuffed.”}

Wookiees are known throughout the galaxy as particularly bad captives. Even “broken” slave born Wookiees - dating back to the period when the Empire condoned slavery - were prone to outbursts and being difficult to subdue. Cheeks was visibly upset by the experience, in particular because he was fundamentally innocent in this fracas.

{“Commander ElleOhh was there, with Wildfire and Tim flanking her, and she said something about a joke and then yelled at us. I was ashamed.”}

He hung his massive head; A difficult admission for a Wookie, Task thought.

"During this... event... do you recall seeing the High Admiral's card, or have any idea who might?"

The Taskmaster was growing weary of this piecemeal story. He just needed to get to the bottom of it, and find the blasted card. Cheeks noticed the lack of compassion or understanding from the Lieutenant Colonel. The Wookiee had a sudden epiphany about the Wing Commander. *He doesn't care at all about us or the story, he just wants to be the person to find the High Admiral's card.* It didn't endear the Wing Commander to the Wookiee, who would remember this in the future.

{“No sir. If anyone would know, I suspect it would be Commander ElleOhh. Excuse me, sir.”}

The Wookiee stood and made his way around the office to the comms panel. As duty officer for the day, he acted as watch commander and was responsible for all the spaces and personnel of Wing I, an assignment that rotated among all the pilots on the *Hammer*.

Task stood as well, and straightened his tunic. Of all the alien species the Empire had finally allowed to serve, he was most comfortable with the Wookiees. Cheeks' recollection of events filled in a lot of gaps, but didn't solve the mystery. He felt like he was finally closing in on it, however; privately Task wondered if this was how it felt to be a bounty hunter, chasing down ghost clues until capturing his prey. He quite liked the image that conjured in his mind.

"Thank you, Captain Demaroo'achyyk. Your cooperation has been a great help to me. I'll be sure to note this in your record so that it shows no malice or responsibility on your part. Carry on."

Task turned to leave, and the ready room door opened quickly and properly. He strode into the corridor and set his course to the Wing I conference room. Each squadron commander had an office adjacent to the conference room, and with a quick glance at his chronometer he knew the CO of Beta Squadron would be in her office, reviewing debriefs.

CHAPTER SIX - ELLEOHH

Commander ElleOhh, Commander of Beta Squadron, had an eidetic memory, quirky sense of humour, and little patience for bad behaviour. When Wing Commander Task arrived at her office, looking for answers from the night before, she was more than happy to relate her story to the man, right down to the finest detail.

Unfortunately for Task, she didn't see the credit card at all during her time at the Drunken Bastion. He knew better than to doubt her recollection, but asked her to fill in the gaps with what she recalled of the events that took place when she arrived.

"I literally just wanted to kick back and relax. I'm sure you know what it's like, having to read all these reports and keep track of everything for the remobilization event. I've never liked paperwork but between this and the new modifications we're testing, I feel like I hardly even get to see Xye as it is, much less socializing in general anymore."

Marriage was uncommon but not unheard of on Imperial ships. Task had genuinely never cared much for romantic company; it made too many demands of him to be worth the trouble. He had little compassion for those who chose to risk their hearts in a galaxy in turmoil. Perhaps one day when peace is assured, when law and order is the rule instead of the exception. Until then, in Task's opinion, the Empire needed clear heads and sound judgment, two things that he felt were rare enough already. Commander ElleOhh was somewhat unique in his experience, capable and level-headed, despite being married.

"As I said, I walked into the Bastion looking forward to relaxing and meeting Captain Xye when he got back from his mission, and what did I walk into? A joke, Colonel Task. I walked into a bar joke happening in front of me, or at least that's what I thought at first. What other reason could there be for an Ewok riding a Wookiee like a wampa on a rancor?"

She had a way with words, Task had to admit.

"So when I realized it was a *fight*, I grabbed a rifle from the rack by the door, and set it to stun. I yelled at them a couple of times, but there was so much going on it was clear they couldn't hear me. Kebla came in and immediately tried to break them up; I tried to warn him but he was already on the move. I knew I'd have to stun them when he caught Cheeks' arm and went flying."

She actually smiled at that, no doubt recalling in vivid detail the young Beta ace flying for the first time without the benefit of a ship.

"So I dumped a few stun bolts into the pair. The first shot missed and hit some of Wolve's equipment, which I'm going to have to replace. Finally, I got a bead on the furballs and got them square in my sights. Cheeks went down after the second stun bolt; I had to hit Solohan with a third. That *chalquilla* really hits his system hard, sir. I stunned them both a final time for good measure, to make sure they stayed out, and went over to check on the crewman that the Twi'lek girl was kicking. Thankfully I didn't have to stun her, but that idiot is still in the medical bay."

Task had seen the report. Evidently the young crewman had heard all sorts of things about Twi'lek women, and believed he could just do and say whatever he wanted to them. Combining bad information with the liquid courage provided by a couple of Beta Blasters, he attempted to touch not just one, but two of Solohan's guests inappropriately. Of course they told the Ewok Captain what had happened, and he insisted on "having a word" with the crewman. This led to the crewman implying that the Ewok was "ill-equipped" (*the report used the exact phrasing but Task was too polite to repeat the words*) to satisfy the Twi'lek ladies. Of course, the drunken pilot had to defend his honour - and that of his guests - and stood on the table to "look the man in the eyes." That led to the altercation with the Wookiee, but while that happened one of the dancers made sure to capitalize on the crewman's misfortune, which carried on till Elle stepped in.

"By the time I sorted out *that* situation, Captain Wildfire and Lieutenant NeuroticTim had arrived, stun cuffed the two hairballs, and got them sitting up on the dance floor. Solohan was completely incoherent - I think the stun bolts and *chalquilla* fried some neurons or something - and Cheeks was just sort of chuffing quietly to himself. Laughing or crying, I couldn't tell. So I had the guys escort them back to their racks while the crewman was taken to medical. Got a few random people in the bar to help me clean up, and I decided I'd had enough and went to bed after filing my report."

She intentionally left out the part where she yelled at them. It didn't serve to further Task's investigation and would only invite more questions from the Wing Commander. Fortunately, the comm system chimed on the Beta Squadron commander's desk, almost as if it had waited for her to finish her story.

{“Commander ElleOhh, this is Captain Demaroo'achyyk, please acknowledge.”}

The translator droid knew all the proper wordings, even if Cheeks wasn't so formal.

"Yes Cheeks, this is ElleOhh. What do you need?"

A brief moment passed where they could hear the Wookiee speaking in his native tongue, followed by the tinny metallic voice again.

{“If Lieutenant Colonel Task is with you, can you let him know his presence is requested at his earliest possible convenience in the High Admiral's quarters?”}

Elle looked up from the communicator, and with wide eyes glanced at the Wing Commander. His expression was indifferent, but she could see he was putting on that face for her benefit. He nodded slowly and turned to leave without a verbal acknowledgment.

"He's on his way, Cheeks."

CHAPTER SEVEN - PLIF & PHOENIX

High Admiral Plif had enjoyed his time in the Drunken Bastion immensely, by all accounts, and regretted leaving early. He had given the Commodore of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Hammer*, Admiral Phoenix Berkana, a direct order to expedite the logo approval so he could come back for the "Grand Opening," when he'd show the crew how they used to drink back in *his* day.

He wasn't above practical jokes either, especially after a few drinks. He genuinely liked his immediate subordinates, and considered them friends. So it was especially satisfying when Admiral Berkana hand-delivered his missing credit card to him *without* notifying that stuffy Lieutenant Colonel Task that he had found it.

"You mean to tell me I missed out on all the fun?"

He was genuinely disappointed but knew the absurd sequence of events that had taken place after he left would never have happened had he been there. For all that he liked to hang out "on the deckplates," so to speak, the crew acted differently in his presence - as one would expect, he supposed. He thought back to his days on the Super Star Destroyer *Sovereign*, as a Lieutenant flying high in Epsilon Squadron, more than 20 years ago. Back in those days, a young pilot didn't need a High Admiral to make the bar an uncomfortable place for him, so he couldn't fault the patrons of the bar - Lambda Squadron in particular - from loosening up after he left. The only being that seemed at ease was the Wookiee

(*Chaps? Checks? Chirps?*) - he could never remember his proper name - who was dancing his cares away before Plif even "darkened the doorway," so to speak.

Admiral Phoenix Berkana - a man with impeccable credentials and a long history - was a personal friend, and they were alone in the stateroom suite set aside on the *Hammer* for the High Admiral, sort of a "home away from home" when his duties took him away from his official quarters on the Imperial Star Destroyer *Challenger*. He knew he could speak freely, and he didn't hesitate as Plif walked over to a side table where one of his prized miniature trees stood, waiting to be trimmed.

"Listen Plif, I don't know if it was 'fun' for those involved, but I *told* you that new chalquilla formula was dangerous. The Ewok physiology just can't filter out the intoxicants fast enough. You know he *still* doesn't remember what happened? He remembers fawning over the girls, then nothing till waking up a few hours ago. Task was interrogating him in the Bastion and he had no clue."

Despite vowing that he would *not* let himself be amused by the whole situation, Phoenix couldn't help but grin at his old friend's back, anticipating the reaction to his next statement.

"I've got a holo of the whole thing."

Very slowly, Plif set the pruning shears on the table. The bafforr tree was delicate and required the utmost concentration when trimming; a single sapling such as this had no real intelligence to speak of but could broadcast raw emotions to anyone within its' limited telepathic range, and a poorly considered trim would be as painful to him as to it. A gift from the House Berkana, the trees were living legends, supposedly incapable of being transplanted from their native planet Ithor. Somehow, Wolve had gotten this one and presented it to his House; since Phoenix knew little about arbory and Wolve had no time for it, they agreed to gift it to Plif. It turned out to be the right decision; over the last decade or so, Plif had nurtured it carefully, pruning the black leaves when needed and polishing the crystalline trunk to a high shine. He trusted no one else with the care of the miniature tree, and brought it with him any time he knew he'd be away for an extended period.

"You... ...*WHAT?!?*"

Phoenix smiled broadly now as the High Admiral turned to him, incredulity painted on his face.

"When I approved this project, headed up by Captain Ward "The Black Ranger" Anders, I strictly stipulated that he personally install a number of holorecorders, without the

knowledge of the rest of the crew. For exactly these circumstances, in fact. Do you want to see what happened?"

It is unclear if anyone had ever seen the expression that crossed Plif's face at that moment. Perhaps his wife, or his children, many years ago. Certainly no one on the *Hammer*, and possibly the entire roster of the TIE Corps had ever seen the childlike, eager expression on the High Admiral; many would doubt it even exists. Yet Phoenix saw it, and knew the holo recording would not disappoint. So he dimmed the lights without prompting and placed the projector in the middle of the low table between his seat and Plif. Off to the side of the room, the tiny bafforr tree began to glow, a faint bluish tint, and he pushed the button that began playback of the holo recording.

"Let me just advance through..." Phoenix mumbled, finding the button and watching as the bar patrons milled about in 10x speed, 10cm tall on the table. The holorecorders had been placed up high so they were looking down from an angle, a perfect perspective.

"Ah, here we are. He released the button and normal time resumed.

Solohan was first visible hanging off the bar despite H0-P5's admonishments, then reappeared carrying two pitchers and several bottles of chalquilla to a table, his normal swaying gait exaggerated by the intoxicant. Seated around the table were no less than *four* Twi'lek females, and none of them were wearing enough clothing to be considered "decent." Solohan approached the table and ducked under it, coming up in between the ladies without having spilled a drop.

"For a drunk Ewok, looks like he's doing pretty well!" Plif was impressed.

"...Just wait..." came the reply.

Solohan deftly refilled the cups arrayed on the table, encouraging the ladies to indulge with him. A crewman with indistinct features sauntered over to the table and said something to the group.

"No sound?" The High Admiral wanted to know what had been said.

"Nope. Wolve plays that music much too loud to get good recordings without external mics. Doesn't matter, you'll see."

Solohan, clearly offended by the crewman's words, hopped up onto the table top. Taking a moment to spread his arms wide, in what appeared to be an attempt to stop the spinning of the room, he finally padded over to the crewman and pointed a finger at him, mouth moving.

"That doesn't look good," Plif remarked. "He really does need to do something about those anger issues."

Phoenix nodded and grunted agreement; he knew what was coming next. Sure enough, as with the last time he watched this playthrough, the crewman's fists balled, and made a motion to strike the Ewok.



Ewoks are known throughout the galaxy, despite being a relatively solitary species living on the forest moon of a relatively unknown system, as a result of the Rebel assault on the second Death Star, under construction at Endor. Beings from the Core to the Outer Rim consider them fundamentally harmless, easy going creatures with limited intelligence. In truth, they were much stronger than their small size would suggest, and they could be quite vicious, with razor sharp teeth, claws, and the reflexes to make the most of them. Captain Solohan retained all of those characteristics even after the experimental augmentation that made him intelligent enough to fly a state-of-the-art starfighter.

The drunken Ewok saw the fist coming and jumped, somersaulting forward over the fist and planting both feet into the crewman's chest, kicking him with the force of a sledgehammer. The blow pushed the man into a group of beings waiting for service from the bar, knocking several down. Without pausing to consider the situation, two of the men still standing rushed in to take down the enraged, inebriated Ewok. He readied himself, but from outside this holorecorder's field of view, a huge arm reached in and grabbed him before he could attack, a fistful of fur and neck, and jerked him backwards. Phoenix paused the recording.

"Look here, Plif." He pointed at a small gathering of frozen photons in the paused scene. "That's your card. He *did* have it, up to this point. Let me switch recorders."

The scene shifted. The table with the Twi'lek women vanished, replaced at an angle 90 or so degrees removed, putting H0-P5 and the bar squarely in view. The group the crewman crashed into earlier were now back on their feet and gathered closely together, watching the commotion without getting too close, as the bartender droid stood with both sets of arms crossed beneath his ample bosom.

"You're going to want to see this in slow-motion," Phoenix said as he fiddled with the controls. Everything slowed down, and Plif watched in amazement as the intoxicated Ewok spun nearly 180 degrees, broke free of Cheeks' grip, and shimmied up his arm. He then climbed *sideways* across the broad chest of the Wookiee, under his other arm and around his torso, then up his back and onto his shoulders.

"Pause it!" Phoenix hit a button and the scene froze, Ewok atop Wookie, wailing on the white blaze cresting Cheeks' fur with both fists.

High Admiral Plif, TIE Corps Commander, began giggling. Within seconds the giggle turned into a full throated belly laugh.

"Now I truly *have* seen it all." Plif had to speak between gales of laughter. "Never in my life did I think I'd see a Wookiee giving an Ewok a piggyback ride."

"Oh, we're not done yet," Phoenix promised. He resumed playing the holo, showing the Wookiee twisting and turning in a futile attempt to extricate the enraged Ewok from his shoulders. Suddenly, he paused it again and pointed wordlessly at the bottom of the projection.

Plif had to wipe tears from his eyes to see what the Commodore was pointing at. In the lower corner of the holo, a small humanoid hand reached down to the ground and picked up something. His card, Plif realized. As Phoenix advanced the recording slowly, they both watched as the owner of the disembodied hand gradually eased into the recording; a lithe young Twi'lek glanced around. Seeing no one coming to claim it, she gracefully slipped over to the bar, and dropped it into a container. In the main section of the holorecording, Lieutenant Commander KeblaOmega flew in slow motion across the space, colliding with the same crowd that caught the drop-kicked crewman, and blaster barrels protruded from H0-P5's lower wrists, hands swinging on cables beneath each arm. Plif couldn't quite make out the writing on the container and turned to Phoenix for enlightenment.

"I haven't quite translated the label," Phoenix said as he zoomed in on the paused scene. "Looks like an old code language, but she put the card in the box for safekeeping, or so it would appear."

High Admiral Plif had been around for a long time. He had learned a lot of things, some more random than others. And during the Galactic Civil War, he had taken some time to decipher older scripts. On a hunch, he leaned into the projection and used the controls to enhance the scene, and when it clarified he knew exactly what the label said.

"It says '*Lost and Found*', Phoenix. It's an older Aurebesh dialect but I can definitely read it. The girl put the card in the box before anyone even realized it was missing."

Now it was Phoenix's turn to laugh, and he did, as thoroughly as he'd ever laughed. The High Admiral joined in, and soon both men felt the unfamiliar ache of muscles in their faces from expressions infrequently enjoyed.

The door chimed and both men looked over at it, cheeks wet from tears of laughter. Exchanging a look, they simultaneously formed their hands to play "*Lizard-Toad-Snake*," a game neither man had played since the days of Academy inductions.

On the count of three, each man contorted his hand into an odd shape. Phoenix crowed victory; he chose toad, which eats lizard. Plif laughed and cuffed his friend on the shoulder.

"Fine, you win. Go get the door, Bird."

Admiral Phoenix Berkana answered the main door to the High Admiral's suite, and the door slid aside quickly and silently. Lieutenant Colonel Narwen Task appeared before him, standing at attention and clearly expecting the High Admiral.

"Sir? I thought this was the quarters of the High Admiral, sir. My apologies." Task turned precisely and had already taken a step before Phoenix could say a word, but when he did it was exasperated.

"Get back here Narwen, you're in the right place. Come on in." He turned and walked back into the main living space.

Lieutenant Colonel Task returned to the High Admiral's quarters, visibly confused. As he continued deeper in the suite, he saw the paused holo, zoomed in on the Twi'lek hand dropping Plif's card into the old container.

"This scene is the Bastion... from a hidden holorecorder...? Lost... and.. flund...? Ah. Found. Yes, that makes sense. Very clever. So then, Phoenix."

He turned away from the frozen holo and met Admiral Berkana's eyes squarely.

"You allowed me to continue looking, despite having found the card how many hours ago? Oh yes, quite funny."

Task was usually the very model of military bearing, at least when interacting with higher ranking officers. This particular trait had been noticed by both the Admiralty and the deckplate personnel, and was usually a source of derision from both. For him to break away from that bearing was an indicator of his irritability, and Phoenix knew the fact that his advancement to flag rank past Task rankled the Lieutenant Colonel deeply. His typical detached professionalism always struggled when speaking to the Commodore, but being directly disrespected drove him to speak more frankly than he would have even then.

"In fact, while I have your attention, you know that Ithorian pilot you adopted into your club, Lieutenant Commander Wolve Excelsior? Seems cut straight from your cloth, despite the obvious differences - namely that I'm his superior officer. May want to rein him in, *sir*." Not that I'm surprised, but I do have better things to do with my time than be disrespected by junior officers."

Phoenix let Task go on, digging himself deeper as the Lieutenant Commander's tone cooled and the Admiral's good mood evaporated. The Lieutenant Colonel was in fact a very capable officer, and he kept the squadrons of Wing I on the *Hammer* in tip top shape. His attention to detail ensured the fighters were always ready to go at a moment's notice, and his paperwork - from mission reports to material lists - was always precisely done. However, Phoenix had never really liked the man, and relished the opportunity to take his former commander down a peg.

"First of all, Wing Commander Task, I remind you that you are speaking to the Commodore of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Hammer*, and in the presence of the High Admiral, TIE Corps Commander, and you will address us as such.

Second, I have no obligation to inform you of *anything* other than giving you the orders of the day. I found the card, and I didn't need to interrogate half of the *Hammer* to do so. You should be thanking me for saving you from continuing your investigation, which would no doubt have continued for hours, if not days."

Task bristled at the criticism. He had conducted his search exactly in accordance with the standard operational procedures for missing items of importance; it hardly seemed fair to expect him to know there were recordings of the events of the previous night.

"Third - and I cannot emphasize this enough - House Berkana is not a "club" and you will show respect. I don't care who you are speaking to, if they're of my House they are under my protection, and your petty need for validation is not an excuse for you to forget that."

Lieutenant Colonel Task nearly trembled in anger, waiting for a chance to reply to the Admiral. Before he could utter a word, the High Admiral himself came out from the refresher and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Come off it, Task. The card was found, everyone has accounted for their actions, and from what I hear you've got that Ewok on a long trip around the fleet. I've spoken personally with the crewman's chain of command and he will be disciplined... once he's out of the med bay. Everything is settled, and once the logo is approved," Plif nodded at Admiral Berkana, "I fully intend to visit the bar again. I denied your request for door repair or replacement, by the way. I think it's clever, making a door that operates differently from person to person. I think it's an excellent metaphor for how some aspects of our fleet should operate, in fact."

Task struggled with abstracts, and hadn't picked up on the way the door operated. He certainly didn't understand the metaphor; taking things literally and directly was a big part of what made him effective. He only knew that doors should run exactly the same throughout the ship, well oiled and maintained, and anything else was chaos. He opened his mouth to speak, but the High Admiral beat him to it.

"That's all for now, Lieutenant Colonel. Please inform your Wing that I appreciate their hard work and that I am looking forward to another night in the Bastion. Dismissed."