



STAR WARS: SUPERMASSIVE BLACK HOLE
A SHORT STORY SET IN STAR WARS: LEGACY

KYLE M. LOH
HARVARD STEM CELL INSTITUTE
HARVARD UNIVERSITY



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Galactic Empire Special Operations Command, 136 ABY

Joint Special Operations Task Force 452 (JTF 452)

Commander Cassandra Dance: female human from Anaxes

Sergeant Major Aiden Page: male human from Corulag

Gunnery Sergeant Amari Tull: male human from Eriadu

Sergeant Jaden Carniss: female human from Bonadan

Sergeant Randall Ridenour: male human from Felucia

Corporal Barak-Dur: male Zabrak from Iridonia

Special Operations Task Force 184 (TF 184)

Darth Mercurial: female human from Dathomir

Darth Lilith: female human from Dathomir

Darth Evanesce: female human from Zios

“The characteristic feature of a black hole is that it represents a region of space ... from which no form of matter, energy, or information can escape.”

—Penrose, R. (1972). “*Black Holes and Gravitational Theory*”. *Nature* (236): 377—380.

The Galaxy, Local Supercluster, The Current Universe

It has been surmised by the physicists and academicians that there are four fundamental forces in the Universe. These forces mediate every interaction between every particle in the Universe, and every act of attraction and repulsion between objects arises from these four forces—

Gravity, which mediates attraction between any bodies of mass. It is transmitted by the graviton, and has infinite range.

The electromagnetic force, which mediates attraction between charged particles. It is transmitted by the photon, and has infinite range.

The strong nuclear force, which mediates attraction between particles in atomic nuclei. It is transmitted by the gluon, and has a range of a millionth of a nanometer.

The weak nuclear force, which mediates attraction between leptons and quarks. It is transmitted by bosons, and has a range of a billionth of a nanometer.

—And yet, the particle physicists and the radio astronomers, studying the primordial designs inscribed into the ceiling of the universe, searching the celestial courts for supersymmetries and supermassive black holes, have missed a fundamental force that transcends all nuclear forces and neutrinos.

In their cosmological constants and charge parities, which are etched in the fabric of spacetime, they have overlooked the fundamental force within *themselves*, within the heart and soul of any living being.

The fundamental force of love and affection mediates attraction between any sentient being, human or otherwise. It is transmitted over infinite range—the force of love does not weaken over the square of its distance, as does light. Emotion binds its partners from anywhere they are in the universe, surpassing any obstacles—its insistent pull reaches anyone, anywhere, at anytime. It is transmitted faster than the speed of light, and partners across the galaxy feel their dire need instantaneously, without transmission lag.

The Imperial Military and the One Sith—hardly either erudite scientists nor philosophers—curiously, also have an interest in forces, which were previously thought to be an esoteric subject broached on only by intellectuals.

Because the definition of a *force* is something that can compel a movement, an attraction: with the force of gravity, say, with a neutron star or a gravity well generator, one can wrench ships

traveling in hyperspace into realspace. With the electromagnetic force, one can capture stray charged ions.

And with the fifth, quintessential force—

With love—you can capture anyone.

“My Master will not make Palpatine’s mistake. All Jedi must die.”

—Darth Nihil (137 ABY). *Star Wars Legacy: Broken, Part 1.*

The Galaxy, Local Supercluster, The Universe
Chiss Space, Unknown Regions, Galactic Rim

The medium of interstellar space was nature’s closest semblance to quietude—an infinite, inky expanse of darkness that permeated the entire universe, a vacuum that encapsulated every star, every planet. It was the very definition of a vacuum: the lack of any particle, of any stray vane of energy, absent of any matter and therefore absent of temperature.

And in was within this remorseless, unremitting darkness that there were curios—naked singularities and twisted vanes of spacetime, miniature black holes imploding into plumes of Hawking radiation and gamma rays. But deep space was also inhabited with other objects, some clearly of unnatural design.

Such as the unilluminated metal body held in abeyance one tenth of a light-hour from the outer periphery of the Thrago System.

The planetary system itself—if it could be even called a planetary system—was a cosmological oddity, with a chiaroscuro pairing of an engorged, crimson supergiant at the verge of stellar supernova catastrophe, with a diminutive, cyan ultrahot dwarf astride it. Caught in an ellipsoid orbit of Keplerian character around these two curiously-paired stars was a ten-kilometer spheroid of pockmarked rock, known as Thrago, veiled with a rarefied atmosphere of sulfur gas. Orbiting at a hundred kilometer radius above the planetoid Thrago was a Chiss military installation, known as Thrago Supply Depot.

Of the objects in the Thrago System, the blue dwarf, surprisingly, was the most senior, and was four hundred million years old. The far grander hypergiant, millions of times larger, was three million years old. After the formation of the system’s two mismatched stars, the misshapen and underdeveloped planetoid of Thrago was assembled from the remaining remnant gases from the protoplanetary cloud, after the majority of the gases had gone towards the furnishing of the two primary stars. A freak accident in stellar nucleosynthesis left Thrago with a faint atmosphere predominated with sulfur. Supply Station Thrago itself was a newcomer to this celestial community, constructed approximately a hundred and fifty years ago.

But the curious object one-tenth of a light-hour away was even more junior of an immigrant—it had arrived to Thrago System sixteen standard hours ago, and since its reversion from hyperspace, had not moved or emitted a single trace of radiation. Its surface was sunless and obscure, in sharp contradistinction to the pair of brilliant stars thirty thousand kilometers distance. Darkened to the point that it was essentially indistinguishable from the black of interstellar space, its outline was impossible to see—but if one *could* see it, one would have saw an angular metallic prow, clearly of unnatural design. Its very visage was predatory, and its concealed, phallic cannons betrayed only one purpose: it had been crafted with only one intent in mind—to kill.

A blotch of Croneau radiation strobed in the darkness, piercing the vacuum. Spacetime malformed and embowed, its topology being rented, and reality skewed as spacetime contorted to admit a new visitor from the alternate dimensions of hyperspace—a fast-moving, cerulean vessel on a high-speed linear trajectory to Supply Station Thrago. Its surface was marked in the serpentine script of the Chiss, and bore no weapons.

The dark vessel roused, its mechanical proboscis catching the lustrous scent of Croneau radiation—food was here. It tremored with a feral anticipation. The time was near.

Azure fire lashed out violently across the stars, and the Chiss vessel spasmed briefly, the gigacolomb ion cannonade generating an induced current of millions of volts across its circuits, and cyan lightning ensnared its electronics, megavolt charges overrunning frail capacitors and aged transistors. It was an exercise in excess—the vessel’s electronics, of civilian grade and unshielded against ion fire or electromagnetic pulses, could only resist up to fifty volts running through its circuits.

Within moments, the vessel’s trajectory slowed, its hull blackened and electrocuted, and it decelerated until it was moving backwards at a high velocity—being pulled back to its pursuer by means of an invisible tractor beam.

There was a resounding metallic report as the interstellar predator engulfed its prey within its maw. The malevolent deed had been done.

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The fire control officer, a Chief Petty Officer from Naval Special Warfare, turned adroitly in his seat to proffer his report.

“Commander, primary target has docked and is in electromagnetic confinement. Engagement by the primary ion battery has led to complete collapse of all electromagnetic systems aboard the primary target. Thermals detect six living organisms aboard, and biometrics from blood supply patterns and heartbeat indicate Chiss: one female, five male.”

The two officers he addressed were a harlequin pair, like Thrago's sons—the first, seated in the command chair, was a human female, tall and slender. Her face was graced with fastidious silvery hair, bespeaking of an aristocratic elegance, although her uniform was austere, with no talismans or excessive decorations to betray any kind of arrogance or avarice. Her uniform was matte black, and carried only the eagle-and-laurel affiliation badge of the Imperial Special Operations Command and the double anodized stars of an Army Major, or a Service Commander of the Navy. Her nametag above her left breast was stenciled with the word: “DANCE”.

The second officer's complexion was more severe, and was callous—the unconscious sneer of his lips and the hardened angularity of his face betrayed that there was a devastating emotional toll being carried by his soul. His uniform was distinct from everyone else's on the bridge: it was black tactical gear, a load-bearing vest replete with a tactical helmet. His breastplate bore a number of accoutrements: campaign ribbons from military actions on hundreds of worlds flung across the galaxy, decorations for valor and bravery, and also the four caramel chevrons and two pips of an Army Sergeant Major, or a Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy. His own nametag, contralateral to his panel of decorations, was stenciled with the word: “PAGE”.

Commander Cassandra Dance nodded to the reporting officer. “Affirmative, Chief.”

She turned to Sergeant Major Aiden Page. “You have the go-order, Team Leader. Failsafe authorization has been granted: Operation Order Noble is in effect.”

“Rules of engagement, ma'am?”

“Check your fire, Sergeant Major—noncombatants are aboard that vessel. Less-than-lethal armaments only.”

His face hardened slowly, until it had the complexion of brass. “With all due respect, ma'am, under General Order 452—”

Her voice was curt. “Sergeant Major, I'm well aware of General Order 452. While you and your Sabers, under Tavira, have free rein to do whatever damn well you please, this mission is under Naval Special Warfare's command—*my* command. You will use lethal force only if and when you are fired upon. I want them *alive*, Sergeant Major, not in body bags.”

He polarized his visor, obfuscating his face and wiping all vestiges of humanity from his form—he was a faceless automaton, ensheathed in blast armor and a microrepeater at his side.

They exchanged salutes, and he stalked off, weapon in hand.

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The incursion teams were gathered around in the tight confines of the hangar, arrayed around the airlocks of the captured vessel—their ingress points. Black-clad and faceless commandos—special operators of the Army Special Activities Battle Expeditionary Regiment (“Saber Force”) and Imperial Naval Special Warfare—stacked to either side of each of the airlocks, weapons readied, gloved fingers tight on triggers.

Aiden’s own team assembled by him as he emerged from the turbolift from the bridge, falling into lockstep with his own loping strides.

The copper-faced Gunnery Sergeant Amari Tull, grandson of Sheeka Tull and the renowned Captain A-98 “Nate” of the Clone Wars, met him immediately.

“What’s the word from topside?”

Page’s face, ensconced within his polarized visor, betrayed no emotion. “There seems to be a notion going around in Task Force 452 that when an officer comes up with an idea, that it’s just as good as if they had carried out the entire goddamn operation. Weapons set to stun, and weapons tight.”

The senior Saber sergeant’s complexion became instantly displeased. “It was the vacuum-head girl, wasn’t it? Full of stupid ideas such as—”

“Off the record, Gunny—if one of those Chiss pulls a holdout blaster on you, I don’t think Tavira and the rest on Coruscant would care too much one way or another if a few of those Chiss got killed. We’re here only to grab the girl—the rest of them are already good as dead.”

Tull’s sneer was full of derision. “Then why the ‘weapons tight’ order? If they’re already going to die—”

Aiden turned on his subordinate. “Sergeant—there are six unarmed civilians aboard that goddamn ship. Are you telling me that fifty commandos will have a hard time subduing them?”

There was only one response. “No, *sir!* Begging the Sergeant Major’s pardon, sir—”

There was a lull as they locked eyes—finally, Page turned away. “Questions, team? We’re executing the takedown soon.”

Barak-Dur’s voice was chary. “Yes, sir. Who are these Chiss, anyways?”

“No clue”, replied Page. “Coruscant wants these guys—and they want the girl alive and well. The rest of the crew are probably expendable.”

Finally, Aiden dismissed them with a flick of his gloved wrist, and he raised his communicator to his raspy lips.

“This is Saber Six to all assault elements. Incursion has been authorized. Go-order in sixty seconds.”

He panned from left to right, surveying his men—steely faces underneath blast visors, steadied hands on steadied weapons. They were ready.

* * *

There were corybantic cries of metallic fire, and the thunder of armored boots against deckplate.

The entire vessel had been plunged into darkness with the ion cannon-induced remittance of the lights, however, night-vision optics provided all the illumination they needed—the word was a grainy collage of cyber green and white lines. The teams swept forward assiduously, taking all precautions—suppressed microrepeaters and muzzled carbines providing overlapping fields of fire as the black-armored commandos invaded the vessel, metastasizing it compartment by compartment.

“*Refresher clear*”, flatly reported Jaden Carniss.

It was a horrific sight—in the zero gravity induced by the failure of the artificial gravity generators, the solid waste and excrement had pelleted into microglobules in suspension in the refresher’s stalls.

Aiden turned away from the sight, and his clipped footsteps echoed across the hallways as he and his operators advanced.

“Saber Six to all elements. What’s the sitrep, teams?”

“*Saber Two here, online and secure. Bunks are clear.*”

“*Sergeant Major, Saber Four here. We’ve taken the auxiliary bridge—no contacts.*”

A terse, quiet report followed them. “*Anaconda One to Saber Six. Biometrics show six thermal contacts on the opposite face of this compartment’s wall, sir—they’re in the bridge.*”

“Affirmative, Anaconda One. I’m authorizing Fire Order Vermillion. Take them out, One.”

“*Copy Vermillion. We’re taking them down.*”

There was the dull, double-thump of concussion blasts as flash-crasher grenades sauntered through the air and detonated on the floor of the command center, three decks above them—the ringing was punctuated with the muffled, staccato reports of suppressed semiautomatic weapons fire.

Aiden noted a pause—undoubtedly, Anaconda One’s Naval Special Warfare team was securing the entire compartment, and performing a sweep for explosive traps or other dead-man devices.

“Anaconda One to Saber Six. All six personalities have been apprehended and are unconscious. All five team operators are uninjured, and no lasting damage has been sustained to the contacts. We’re extracting them out of here, sir.”

Page nodded curtly—all of this had been elaborately-staged operation that had a crisp and simple conclusion. No one would have expected worse of the Imperial Special Forces other than complete success and redundant contingency measures, should the unexpected occur. A textbook operation.

“Affirmative, One. Six out.”

* * *

Page ran a finger underneath the Chiss female’s lithe, cobalt jaw, admiring its sheen and consistently—it was smooth, as if the underside of a diamond blade. The female prisoner was being kept in her own ward aboard the stealth vessel’s medical bay—she had been restrained to a medical cot, but for now, she was submerged in the depths of unconsciousness: her breathing was cyclical and soft, her eyes twitching underneath her eyelids as her mind underwent the convolutions of REM sleep.

Her skin was unblemished: the commando ion blast that had ensnared her had been sufficient to evoke an artificial electric arrhythmia in her central nervous and cardiac systems. The induction current elicited by the stun bolt had reset her electroencephalogram, resetting thalamic—cortical activity to the synchronous, low-frequency activity reminiscent of sleep, therefore stunning her into unconsciousness. The electrocardiogram had been more disconcerting, as she had experienced a mild arrhythmia for several hours: however, her innate pacemaker activity had restored normal electrical activity without prompting from corrective L-type Ca^{+2} channel modulators.

The rest of the team was crowded around the unconscious captive, their positions at ill ease.

Sergeant Ridenour entered the ward, a gleaming datapad in hand. He waved it in mock salute.

“Sergeant Major, the latest from the spooks at Intelligence. Dideoxy sequencing is complete. Single-nucleotide polymorphism identity of the primary personality matches her file. It’s her.”

The hardened lines of Page’s face slackened slightly—the hit had been accurate and true: a precise interdiction of the target Chiss vessel one-tenth of a light-hour from the Thrago System, and the correct target had been apprehended. Mission accomplished, and no eagles lost.

They were interrupted by Amari Tull’s thunderous laugh—in the close confines, it was like a thunderclap. “Hey, Sergeant Major—remember Csilla, around ’34? Two years ago?” Aiden turned back to address him, and he had a long-suffering expression on his face.

“Yes, Gunnery Sergeant. I remember Csilla.”

The jovial Gunnery Sergeant turned to address the entire team—“The Sergeant Major here and I were on Csilla two years ago—with JTF 452, like always. The brass sent us in to take some sick Chiss fuck—Mitta’gal’tarni or some shit like that. So the Sergeant Major says ‘yes sir’ to whatever two-piece officer gives the orders, and we slip onto Csilla through the normal way, and nab the guy. After we drag his ass to Byss and interrogate him, and he’s screaming all sorts of shit that he doesn’t know where Fel is, etcetera and such, and Intelligence gets all pissed and wants to start doing some dark stuff to him so that he talks. Then, the Sergeant Major, on some crazy-ass whim, decides to ask the guy his name. And you know what he says? It’s Mitta’galtarne, spelled with an ‘e’ at the end.”

The majority of the squad exploded into laughter.

Aiden’s expression became truculent. “I had no goddamn idea. They even had the same common name—‘Agalt’. How was I supposed to know?”

They were consumed by raucous laughter now, and Tull continued, delighted—“So we had to drag our asses back *fifteen thousand light-years* from our base in the Deep Core all the way back to Chiss Space, infiltrate Csilla, and then nab the *right* guy, and then haul ass another fifteen thousand light years back to Byss! And when Tavira found out that we’d tortured some random Chiss guy to insanity and had to travel an additional thirty thousand light years—”

Page’s voice was flat. “*Grand Admiral* Tavira cared less than a Gamorrean’s fart about that one. Hell, she wrote up General Order 452 specifically to cover contingencies *like* that one.”

Praka-Dur’s face, however, was pained as he leaned forward.

“From the Hells of the Sith, sir—with all due respect, is this whole Csilla business true?”

Aiden nodded perfunctorily.

The Zabrak commando's expression was twisted in agony. "So, JTF 452 infiltrated the sovereign space of the Chiss Ascendancy, slipped onto Csilla, and kidnapped and tortured some random Chiss civilian who had no idea where Roan Fel was?"

No one answered.

Praka-Dur turned to Tull, infuriated. "And what the *hell* did you do to the first guy?"

Amari's lips split into a malevolent grin. "Well, we couldn't send him back to Chiss space and all. Too much of a risk for JTF 452 to get back without detection, and what was Tavira going to do? Have some half-dead Chiss civilian start writing stories about some jet-black commandos nabbed him in his sleep, hauled him into Imperial space, and tortured the brains out of him? Of course not—we threw him into a black hole near Koornacht, and that was the end of it."

The Zabrak commando's motion was fluid—he was upright in a moment, his face contorted with rage.

"*You killed him?*" he demanded.

Tull's voice grew quiet and lethal.

"I don't like your tone, soldier."

"God *damn* it!" the Zabrak exploded. "You invaded Chiss space, kidnapped some random civvie, and then threw him into a fucking black hole in the Deep Core? What is this *shit*?"

"Corporal, as much as I am aware that you are on your first tour of duty after graduating from the 1st Special Forces School—you are insubordinate and out of line."

The Zabrak stiffened, his civilian character straining to escape the indoctrination imprinted by him by military decorum.

"*Out of line?*" His voice was a hoarse bellow of rage. "You kidnapped a Chiss civilian, tortured him, and then got rid of him by throwing him into a gaping hole in the spacetime continuum, where his body was spaghettified until he was one thousand kilometers long, head to toe!"

"I was following orders—orders issued by the Commander-in-Chief of the Special Operations Command."

Barak-Dur retorted furiously, "*Orders?* I'm quite sure, Sergeant, your orders didn't provision for the forced disappearance and murder of a citizen of a foreign sovereign state."

Tull's inchoate rage became excoriating.

"What the *fuck* would you have done, soldier? Huh?" The gunnery sergeant pinned him against the wall, and his face flushed with rage.

"This Mitta'gal'tarni guy was some sick son of a bitch—blowing up stormtroopers left and right. Would you rather have just let him happily live in Chiss space, sending Fel's Imperials baradium bombs to kill more of our men and women in the Service? While he was hiding behind Chiss political immunity? God *damn* it, Corporal, what the *fuck* is up with your fragged brain? Has your indoctrination been *wiped*? Is the life of a single Chiss civilian worth more than a thousand stormtroopers? How many children have seen their fathers come back in body bags, missing limbs, because of this Chiss bomb-maker? How many men, women, and aliens of the Service did this Chiss murder?"

The Zabrak's face was livid—his chitinous facial plates were swollen with blood. "This civilian didn't murder a *single* stormtrooper. You invaded Chiss space, and then tortured and killed a Chiss civilian—while the true perp was still sending out baradium bombs, and what did SOCOM on Coruscant gain? The dead body of one more innocent Chiss civvie—in some god-forsaken black hole in the Koornacht Cluster—"

Page's voice was stentorian—"Attention! Officer on deck!"

Tull and Praka-Dur froze, petrified—their hands adhered to their foreheads, their eyes sunken into thousand-meter stares at the blank wall, scrutinizing it as if some astrological truth was contained within the flat sheet of durasteel.

Commander Cassandra Dance strode onto the deck, her stride firm, the delicate features of her face accentuated by her frame of wintry hair.

Her stance was askance as she inspected both Tull and Praka-Dur, who were so still and engaged in quivering salutes that it appeared they were in carbonite hibernation.

She glanced at Page. "Problems, Sergeant Major?"

"No, ma'am", he replied. His voice was clipped.

The commander afforded both Tull and Praka-Dur another curious glance, and then turned back fully to address the Sergeant Major.

"Coruscant has signaled back to us—'bravo zulu' to you and your team, Sergeant Major, for a job well done. Tavira sends her compliments on a clandestinely-prosecuted operation."

“Thank you, ma’am. Did we receive redeployment orders?”

Dance nodded, and continued, “We’re to make our way back to Prakith, in the Deep Core, with best possible speed.”

“What’s in store on Prakith?”

“Intelligence operates an undercover safehouse there—Mission Staging Site Oasis. We’ll hole up in Oasis, and then Joint Task Force 452 will be joined by members of Task Force 184. We’ll be handing over the prisoners to Task Force 184, and then they’ll take it from there.”

Parak-Dur’s curiosity was sufficiently piqued that he spoke up. “Task Force 184, ma’am?”

Cassandra dipped her head in acknowledgement. “That’s an affirmative, Corporal.”

The Zabrak turned questioningly to his team leader, and Page supplied, “Special Operations Task Force 184 is another Special Forces detachment, Corporal. Best of the best, but no one hears about them too often—their record is studded with Jedi kills, though.”

The Zabrak’s face hardened to the density of chitin, but he said nothing more.

Page looked at his commanding officer. “Commander, TF 184 wants in on the prisoner?” He flicked his head at the resting female Chiss.

“That’s an affirmative. They’ll meet us on Prakith, and we’ll be handing over the prisoner to her. After that, we’re clean of her.”

Aiden’s voice was demurring. “With all due respect, ma’am, this Chiss is JTF 452’s work—*ours*. If Tavira wants something done with this perp, we started the job, and we should be the ones to finish it.”

Cassandra shrugged lightly, and unlike Aiden, there was no jealousy in her voice.

“Coruscant’s orders were unusually explicit, Sergeant Major—JTF 452 snags the prisoner, and then TF 184 takes over. That’s it: it’s in their court from there.”

Parak-Dur’s lips parted hesitantly, as if shaping words: finally, he spoke contritely, “Commander—if I may be so bold to ask: what does this ‘Task Force 184’ want with this prisoner?”

“I don’t know, Corporal. Coruscant issues the orders, and we execute those commands. If there’s anything you’ll learn from Saber Force, Corporal, it’s that orders should be followed to the letter, and nothing more nor nothing less.”

“Thank you, ma’am”, he said contritely. “I was just wondering—since we clandestinely infiltrated Chiss space and assaulted an unarmed, noncombatant vessel—”

A flicker of irascibility passed over Dance’s face. “The Imperial Military was not founded on logic, Corporal, it was founded on *orders*. Orders are orders, and all orders are to be obeyed—without question. Someone on Coruscant thought this woman was important enough for us to slip into Chiss space, but I assure you that nothing serious will happen to her. Some hard questions, probably, but after that, she’ll be released again, with her ship.”

Cassandra turned to Aiden. “How is our prisoner doing? Heart rate stabilized?”

Ridenour, the combat medicine specialist, answered for his commander. “Aye, ma’am. Natural pacemaker activity was re-instituted five hours after the stun bolt. Electrocardiogram shows that endogenous activity has been fully recapitulated. No pharmacological correction was necessary.”

The Naval Special Warfare officer parsed his statement for the important parts. “Alright, good. Has she woken yet?”

“No ma’am. The past nine hours have been spent in theta cortical activity, according to the electroencephalogram.”

“Is that normal?”

Sergeant Ridenour shrugged. “Yes, ma’am. Special Forces doctrine dictates that stun bolts of the same charge are fired all across the galaxy—every species reacts differently to them. Wookies and Gamorreans can sustain several blasts of such power, while it might knock a Cerean unconscious for several days. I’m not acquainted with the average statistics for Chiss.”

Dance drew a delicate hand, and placed it on the soporific Chiss’s shoulder, shaking it—when she did not stir, the officer shook it more violently, and suddenly, the captive was awake, her eyes wild with terror, face contorted in a mask of agony—her last memory had been of a beryl bolt of fire that had consumed her entire world; the stun beam.

She emitted a shrill scream, but Cassandra’s features were emollient: her very visage was soothing, her voice the sound of sibilant music.

“My name is Commander Cassandra Dance: Naval Special Warfare, Imperial Navy.”

The Chiss's expression grew dire, and as the shock faded, it was replaced with a germane fear.

“Imperial Navy? I've done nothing wrong—”

“I know. I sincerely apologize for taking you from your vessel against your will—for this, I am sincerely sorry. You have my word that you will not be held one moment longer than is necessary for us to complete our mission: and afterwards, you will be returned safely to Chiss space, with monetary compensation from the Empire for your cooperation.”

Her tone became intransigent, her features stiffened, and they adopted an aristocratic character, dignified and unused to inury and injustice. “I have done nothing wrong. What gives the Empire the right to attack a sovereign vessel of the Chiss Ascendancy? Where is my crew? Where is my vessel?”

Cassandra's face grew pained, and Aiden realized that she had unwittingly exposed her naked emotion: a stiletto of regret and doubt had slit the officer's naïve heart. It was in that moment that Page realized how much of a neophyte his commanding officer was at clandestine operations. Her naivety and gentle heart would soon undoubtedly become calloused—like the hearts of most of his men.

“Ma'am—I have the greatest respect for the Chiss Ascendancy, and I—”

The Chiss shrieked impetuously, “*Lies!* If you have so much vaunted respect for the Ascendancy, then *why* am I in chains? Why?”

She thrashed violently, seeking to release herself from the metal chains that bound her to the medical ward: while Aiden watched her carefully, he knew that she had no chance of escape—learning how to immobilize a captive was one of the first talents attained by even the most junior Special Forces trainee.

Amari's face grew dark, and he began to finger his safed microrepeater, which was slung by his side.

“Ma'am, I—” began Cassandra.

“*Why does he have a gun?* Why are Imperial soldiers surrounding me with guns? I demand to know why I am being held!”

Tull's voice was crueller than the Sarlacc's maw.

“Girl, you're lucky that Coruscant wants you *alive*—because otherwise, I'd take pleasure in shoving you out the airlock.”

Cassandra rounded on Tull, and she extended an accusatory finger. Her face clouded with rage.

“How *dare* you speak to her in that way, Gunnery Sergeant. Out of here—now.”

The Chiss woman grew still, and it was then that she realized how dire her need was.

* * *

Work in progress

Work in progress

Work in progress