

Homecoming

by Cerine Hero

featuring a world and characters created by Rogue Wolf / Sumo-Griz

It wasn't exactly a fair fight.

Zaress was holding back significantly. It was hard for any mammal, no matter how trained or strong, to match dragon blood and dragon bones. Nonetheless, the wolf was trying his best, giving her a run for her credits in skill if not in raw strength. The smaller, skinnier canine was quicker, keeping the musclebound drake back-footed as she let him have a turn going on offense. She blocked a heavy, high kick with her forearms, her biceps bulging just behind them. The impact rolled down her elbows and into her shoulders, causing her broad back to flex. Brown scales rippled across her swollen muscles.

Droplets of sweat clouded the air as Rogue backpedaled, shifted his weight, and tried a snap kick at Zaress's abdomen. His foot thumped against her solid belly but the drake didn't budge. She had weight over the wolf and strength in spades; if she didn't want him to move her, he couldn't. Zaress grasped his ankle and slung him backwards. Rogue fell onto the padded mat in the center of the training room, sweat flicking from his bare fur. His tank top was clinging to his fit figure as he rolled with the momentum, gaining his feet again outside of the drake's reach.

Zaress lunged forward, putting the wolf back on the defense with slow but heavy swings of her arms and a shoulder check. Rogue slipped outside the swings but ate the bulk of her shoulder against his own, and he spun to the outside, getting his arms around Zaress's muscular neck and trying to wrestle her to the ground.

She simply stood there, pulling herself up to her full height and letting him dangle from her scaled mantle. Then she grabbed his arms and slung him over her head, and he landed with a solid *thump* on the padded mat.

"You're too big," Rogue wheezed, trying to catch his breath.

"Tell that to the rhino," she reminded him, referring to the Bloodreaver pirate their team had defeated not too long ago. It had taken all four of them to overpower him. The drake ran a hand through her slick hair, pinning it back behind her wide ears. "Now come on, I'll give you one more chance."

Rogue inhaled and rolled to his knees. His eyes flitted across Zaress's physique – glistening skin and scales and light tank top clinging to her with sweat. In the drake's vision, the wolf's face was glowing bright with heat. She hoped it was just from exertion and he wasn't getting distracted.

The wolf lunged forward, angling to throw a right hook. Zaress bought it, putting her weight against the swing and shifting her arm to deflect. But the wolf was lighter and more agile – he feinted, bouncing back the other way and getting a jab against the drake's ribs before she could bring her mass back around. Zaress growled and tried to grab his arm, but he ducked back, letting her overbalance, and then he had the heel of his palm against her cheek.

"Gotcha," he sighed.

Zaress flipped him on his back again. "Good job," she told him, grinning.

Leaving the wolf to lay flat, She padded away across the mat in the training room, stretching and massaging her muscles. Hopping down from the raised mats, she met their patient audience member. The gray-furred tiger-coyote handed her a steel mug full of filtered ship water. After that workout, it tasted great.

The soft hum of the *Stormbearer* in mid-transit surrounded them on all sides. The lights recessed in the ceiling flickered again, as they had begun to do sporadically. The primary electrical systems in the ship were hanging on by a thread. They were due to drop out of transit in another day, on the edge of Republic space, for a repair and refit. Rogue, Zaress, Gray, and Rienne had missed the real fun on their last operation, as the *Stormbearer* and the rest of the Ranger Corps had scuttled a Bloodreaver cruiser. Their mothership had sustained modest damage, which was a good outcome, all things considered. The ship would dock for a couple weeks for repairs, and that meant that the rangers

who had leave time accrued could finally spend it.

"I guess I feel fine leaving you alone," Zaress said, leaning against a bulkhead wall with her water mug.

On the thick mat in the center of the sparring arena, Rogue groaned and rolled himself onto his side. "Is that why we were sparring?" As he tried to sit up, Gray climbed onto the mat and knelt down beside the prone wolf. The muscular tigyote laid his paw on Rogue's shoulder and began to inspect him. The wolf sighed. "Are we doing doctor right now? I'm embarrassed enough as is..."

"I felt that shoulder impact in my gut over there," the medic explained, pinching fingertips into various parts of the wolf's shoulder for reactions. "So let me work."

Rogue winced and let him work, turning his attention back to Zaress – who Gray pointedly did not bother checking for injuries. "So will you be heading out soon?"

"As soon as we dock and get the all-clear," the drake replied, nodding. The set the empty mug down on the bench beside her.

"Where are you headed?" Gray asked, his ears perking up in curiosity.

The drake crossed her arms, pinning her full chest between two fuller, muscled biceps. "Since we are nearby, I figured it was high time I got back and visited my clan. It's been a few years."

"Oh, that's right, I forgot that the draken homeworld is here in the sector," Gray replied. "Well, be well on your journey, then."

Zaress grinned. "Keep an eye on him for me, would you? I don't think he can make it without me."

"I already am," the medic replied, continuing to check over the wolf.

Rogue just sighed.

Travel was a strange experience for Zaress. At least, traveling as something other than a ranger, shuttled from place to place in starships and just doing what she was told. Stepping outside that comfortable bubble of the Corps and into a civilian space again was unusual. Too large for traditional docking methods, the *Stormbearer* positioned itself as a satellite to the large orbital station inside Republic space. Shuttles ran personnel and materials between the ship and the station while a swarm of service vessels clouded en masse around the carrier. There were other large ships docked at the station or floating in orbit nearby. Some were visible against the striated brown clouds of the gas giant below or hidden among the dark between stars above.

Zaress found the crowds in the station unnerving. Too many people, too tightly clustered, not knowing who anyone was. She towered above most of the mammalians and rare aliens around her, and people gave the heavily-muscled drake plenty of berth, but it was still uncomfortable, even for the assault-trained ranger. Zaress had joined the Corps directly from her homeworld years ago, and had spent very little time around the "wider Republic community," as briefing vids would put it. And she had rarely taken opportunities for leave, so she had grown far more accustomed to spending time around her comrades more than anything.

Which, until recently, was essentially just Rogue.

Zaress made her way across the station promenade, ignoring the bright, animated signs trying to sell her imported products from the Republic and beyond. Republic security forces, in white-painted armor much like the kind she wore on operations, walked among the crowd, their tesla-stun rifles clamped to their backplates.

With the crowd, she was barely able to reach the docking arm and find the shuttle that would take her to her home system. The civilian transport vessel felt strange. Clean. Modern. Bright. The seats were small for a drake, let alone one of her bulk. But at least there was nearly no one heading to her little backwater part of the galaxy. The Republic presence on the draken homeworld was minimal. For a few important reasons. So the drake squeezed into her seat, flipped the middle armrest up for more room, and slept for the transit across the stars.

The trip was uneventful, if long. Zaress was tired and stiff from a day's travel across the void between the systems and only too happy to get out into the older, dirtier, and less sophisticated orbital station serving this star and its cluster of planets. No bright signs and holographic icons greeted her here, just narrow service passageways and piping. This station felt more like home, from the tight fits and patches of darkness where lights had failed – which didn't inconvenience her any – to the utilitarian spaces and occasional creaks and pings sounding from somewhere in the distance. This was no transit hub for citizens of the Republic to come to and fro, packed shoulder-to-shoulder with shops struggling to squeeze excess credits out of them. It was a metal can serving as a bare-minimum effort for an arm of the galaxy that contained almost nothing of interest. No security guards in armor roamed the halls, and the engineers and attendants all kept to themselves. There were practically no travelers, either. The only people eager to talk were scruffy ship jockeys looking for work.

Zaress chartered a rickety sublight hopper to take her to her homeworld and settled into her seat, waiting as her pilot, a fox, zipped across the system. Before long, the brown and blue marble of her homeworld began to grow in her view, filling the hopper's viewport with reflected sunlight. Silver clouds swirled in bands across the planet's surface, bringing much-appreciated shade across the sun-soaked land. But she only had a few minutes to appreciate the high-seated view of her home before the fox slid the blast shutter down over the viewport. The atmosphere would soon be aflame around them as they entered.

“Gonna get bumpy,” the pilot warned her. Behind him, Zaress just sat back in the cracked leather of her bucket seat, closing her eyes with her thick arms crossed over her ribs. Nothing she wasn't used to.

As promised, the old junker shook and rattled with the force of reentry. The roar of friction-burning atmosphere outside was a dull undertone to the chorus of metallic rattling and banging within the vessel. Zaress could feel the chaotic vibrations rippling through her muscles and bones, to say nothing of anything softer. Eyes held shut, the distant fear of imminent death, shaking and swaying with the motion... it felt like that very first time she went upwards into the stars, recruited away to join the Ranger Corps in a pique of resentment.

And then, just like before, it was over. The groaning ship slowed enough to slide through the atmosphere without ripping itself apart. Zaress opened her eyes, watching as the pilot was flipping old-pattern switches and toggles to adjust the mechanics to planetary flight. Once he had them situated, he rolled the shutter up again and the cockpit was full of warm light. A vast stretch of desert sprawled out below them, with mountains rising in the distance. A small speck of white and gray grew larger as they closed on it, and eventually it was identifiable as a small spaceport, little more than a slab of sandstone painted with landing marks and surrounded by a number of pre-fab buildings. A Republic flag fluttered from the peak of one large building.

The fox landed the hopper in one of the open plots – which was, coincidentally, all of them. The old ship hissed and popped and let out a strained sigh of relief to be on its legs again. Zaress offered her thanks and stepped out of the side hatch of the decrepit bucket. Her skin immediately prickled under the wash of hot, dry air that blew across her. The wind carried the grit of sand in its wake, scouring her skin and pinging from her exposed scales. She covered her eyes from the bright daytime glare above, unused to the intensity of the silver sun after years inside of starships. The conditions were intense and difficult to tolerate.

It was home.

Zaress pulled her bag onto her shoulder again as the system hopper protested its short rest and lifted back into the air again. The wind whipped at the drake's hair and ears as she walked across the white stone slab towards the desert. There was a ramp leading down from the foundation to the open desert, almost like the spaceport was a tiny stone island in the middle of an ocean. As Zaress reached the tip of the ramp, a door opened on one of the pre-fabs beside her and a tired-looking auburn wolf in a hood and breezy but covering clothing stepped out to greet her. He was an off-worlder, a Republic

liaison stationed on one of the most backwater planets within the border. The wolf took a moment to look her over, his eyes lingering on the Ranger Corps insignia on her bag.

“Well, this is something I don't see often,” he said, letting the statement linger on the wind a bit before adding, “Anybody.”

Zaress snorted and cracked a grin despite herself. She peered across the open emptiness of sand stretching out in front of her. “It's almost the high solstice, right?”

“Two more days,” the wolf replied, his reddish paw appearing out from underneath his sleeve to hold up two fingers. “Coming back for the clanmeet, huh? The families should all be gathering up at the oasis about now, I'd guess.”

“Thanks,” she said, nodding in his direction. Without another word, she began to head down the ramp to the expanse of sand.

“Welcome home, earth clan!” the wolf called after her, waving. He stood there and watched her step out onto the dunes, leaving footprints behind. “Hey, uh... you want to borrow a speeder?”

Zaress stopped.

The speeder made short work of the desert. Her bag belted around her waist, Zaress felt the vibrations of the old-model hover transport between her thighs and heard the rumble of its engine in her ears. It kicked up a plume of dust behind her, expanding into a wide cloud before dispersing on the wind, settling somewhere else, as if it mattered much at all in these wastes. The drake eyed the shimmering heat haze over the horizon. Twice she thought she saw tents and tall trees in the mirage, but it was too soon, even flying over the dunes.

The sun set and Zaress took shelter under a large spur of rock, weather-worn by wind, for the night. She ate a ration meal of dried meat and barely reconstituted vegetable soup. The drake thought she'd grabbed a fish meal. Well, no hope of that until she got back to inhabited space, then...

The next morning, the drake got her bearings and headed northwest. By afternoon, she saw the shape of white cloth and tall palms within the indistinct haze once again, but this time they didn't vanish as she got closer. The indistinct shapes resolved into familiar sights: large family tents, with their white cloth drapes blocking the sun and sand. The families of the earth clan gathered once a year, at the high solstice, to meet and celebrate together. There was food, swimming at the oasis, bonfires, and the telling of the old lore. The elders would discuss matters of importance for the families, and the young adults would, well...

It was expected that the youths would disappear for a while with members of other families. Of the opposite sex. Since Zaress was expected back at the *Stormbearer* in a couple weeks, she didn't plan to indulge in any of that.

The earth clan's encampment completely encircled the multiple lakes of the oasis, with the tents staked into the scrubby land around the thick sand-grasses growing around the water. Fibrous palm trees grew in the moist sand, their roots reaching to rich soil under the ground. They covered the lakes in welcome shade with their wide leaves. The air felt cooler here already, though Zaress guessed it was more mind over matter than anything physical. She piloted her speeder up to the outskirts of the camp, where several families' caravans were sitting, still being unloaded by strapping young drakes. The pair of them were stripped to the waist, white robes tied over short leather trousers. It didn't take them long to hear the speeder approaching or notice the cloud of dust it was kicking up.

Zaress stopped a respectful distance away and stepped off the speeder. It powered down and sank lifeless onto the sand beside her feet. The male drakes watched her, eyeing her unusual dress. Zaress still had on her off-duty clothes from the *Stormbearer*, a snug shirt and dark utility pants, which were now fairly covered in sand and doing her no favors in the heat. But she was still unmistakably an earth drake and had the right to be here, so the others didn't raise an alarm.

“Cousin,” one of the drakes, standing on the palmwood wagon, called out to her. He spoke in Draken, a language Zaress hadn't heard in a while, and addressed her as an unrelated clanmate. He was

from another family than she was, but all the drakes of the earth clan showed respect to their peers.

Zaress hefted her bag onto her shoulder. "Cousin," she replied in greeting. "May I enter?"

"We won't stop you," the other drake replied, rubbing sweat from his forehead with his arm. His tufted tail curled around his shins. "But your mother may be unhappy to see you."

My reputation has spread, she thought. No surprise; how many drakes even left the clan? Zaress nodded to them both and walked past, stepping into a lane between two of the family tents. It didn't take long before it felt like she was lost within a nest of drakes. Her approach hadn't been stealthy – more of her kin were coming to investigate the noise and the cloud of sand. Working clan members saw her and stepped aside, letting her pass. A group of hatchlings running along the pathways between tents and popping in and out of the flaps saw their taller, strangely-dressed cousin and stopped, unsure what to do. Zaress just nodded at them as she walked by, heading towards the center of the clanmeet.

It wasn't long before she was met by heavier, muscled drakes like her, carrying spears in their fists. News was already spreading and her escort was here. Among the warriors, she noted a few from her own family, and it was absolutely not a coincidence. They were wearing hoods and soft, white cloaks over their skin and scales, but the family insignia on their belts was still as plain as the sun. To Zaress's surprise, a female drake from another family stepped out in front. She was more slender than the ranger, but still among the largest in the group. Her reptilian eyes were a shocking blue where Zaress's were green. Her brown hair was worn long, with some brushed in front of her wide ears and bangs cut short above her eyes.

Kyress.

The warrior leaned on her spear and inclined her chin at the bigger drake. She looked great. A few more scars on her skin and scales missing from her shoulders, but they only added to her casual strength. Zaress hadn't seen another female drake – or any drake, for that matter – since she left. Kyress was wearing a leather-reinforced tunic, belted around her ribs and leaving her firm middle exposed. Her scales rustled with swollen muscle, but the ranger could only imagine what having access to more favorable meals from the ship's gallery would do to her. After all, she'd barely stopped growing since signing up for the Corps.

Kyress winked, away from where the other warriors could see. "Cousin," she greeted, her voice moderated within an inch of its life to be as flat as possible.

"Cousin," Zaress replied, cutting her eyes towards the other drakes fanning out to surround her. Elders and children were gathering around the scene, watching curiously from behind the wall of muscle and spears. The show of force was unnecessary, but the message was understood. "It was easy to figure out who was coming, was it?"

"It would either be that bumbletongue wolf at the station or you," Kyress explained, "and he knows better than to intrude on the clanmeet." The warrior tilted her head towards the center of the camp. "The matriarch wants to speak to you. Immediately."

"I was coming to see her," the ranger replied.

"Then come along," Kyress told her, using the butt of her spear to part the onlookers and then walking along the lane between the family tents shoulder-to-shoulder with Zaress. Draped cloths overhead kept them half-shaded from the bright sun. As they walked, the warrior surreptitiously whispered, "You've grown huge."

"Plenty to eat," Zaress replied, keeping her gaze focused squarely ahead. "If I could have brought you some fish, I would have."

"What is that?"

"Animal from the sea. Light and salty meat. It's incredible."

"Like water clan food?"

"Better than water clan food."

"Sounds lovely."

The news of the clan's lost cousin returning spread like fire. The procession of warriors picked

up a large number of followers, and more ran ahead to the center of the encampment. The tents grew larger and more ornate as they approached the heart of the oasis, a space reserved alongside the shore of the largest lake. Trees towered here, casting pools of swaying shade. An open space with a large mound of palmwood piled behind a low platform with seats for the family elders. Overlapping triangular canopies of cloth provided shade above the platform. A crowd had already poured into the storytelling circle, waiting to watch the upcoming trial.

There were a few elders in attendance, sitting cross-legged on their palm-stuffed cushions upon the wooden dais. A path was made to the front of the elders' seat and Kyress walked Zaress into the center of the rings of stone seats laid out among the grasses. But the warrior stopped at the final ring and pushed Zaress forward, offering her up alone to the elders. There was a hush among the crowd as the strangely-dressed drake dropped her travel bag at her side and then stepped forward, bringing herself to the foot of the platform. She was underneath the span of the canopy, and her eyes adjusted to the middle light. Her thermal vision, evolved to hunt prey in the frigid desert nights, made the elders glow in their seats.

Zaress respectfully dropped to her knees and sat, palms on her thighs and head lowered.

The matriarch, seated on the center cushion of the dais, held out a clawed hand. A young male attendant rushed to her side and offered himself as a brace to pull herself up to her feet. The elderly drake was lost within her white robes and unlike most of the other drakes, she was festooned with golden jewelry, set with ambers and rubies. Thin brown hair giving to gray spilled from her hood and onto her chest. Leaning on a twisted palmwood staff – an old spear with its head removed – the matriarch took several unsteady but careful steps to the edge of the dais. With Zaress seated and the wooden platform offering her a few extra inches of height, the hunched woman looked down on the younger drake.

“Zaress of no family,” the matriarch hissed, her voice a rattling whisper with age. “You departed from the clan long ago. Why have you returned?”

The ranger paused a moment before answering. She could feel the stares of the entire clan boring into her at this point. More were coming to see the commotion; this was almost a small clanmeet all on its own.

“I have been apart for very long,” Zaress explained, “and I wished to see kin again. I understand I have no claim to family any longer. But I am still of the earth, and I have come for clanmeet.”

The matriarch hissed under her breath. “Look at me, Zaress of no family.”

Zaress inclined her head, looking up at her mother.

A ringed hand crashed across her muzzle. Zaress knew it was coming; she endured it without a flinch. There was little reaction from the crowd, but behind her, Kyress winced in sympathy. Zaress lowered her face back down, tasting blood on her lip from where a ring had struck it.

“It is not within us to come and go as we please,” the matriarch admonished. She raised her clawed hand up and gestured to the desert beyond the encampment and oasis. “Out here in the wastes, families live and die by the work of everyone. We hunt, we knit, we carve. All together. No one lives alone. They only die alone. For anyone to forsake the good of the family is to be stripped of the honor given to them by their family. Do you believe you could simply return and be restored to honor, Zaress of no family?”

“No,” Zaress replied without hesitation, shaking her head. “I do not come to ask to be returned to family. You are right. I left my family weakened without my presence.” She inhaled and her corps-issued shirt stretched around her chest. “But I have found a new family.”

The matriarch paused, tilting her head slightly. A mutter of interest rippled through the crowd, and the old drake waved for silence. Her eyes flicked across the scars Zaress had gathered from her time with the Rangers. “What kind of family could you have found among the Republic?” she asked.

“I have found a family who fights for the good of those who aren't themselves,” Zaress explained.

“You are a warrior?” the matriarch asked, even if the answer was fairly evident.

“Yes,” Zaress answered. “I fight alongside friends and safeguard the weak. I fight with a wolf to whom I owe my life. And I would guard him with all I have. I fight with a healer, a kind man. And a fox, who is... learning the value of family, herself. But she is competent and cunning. They are my family now.”

The matriarch was quiet for a while. The crowd listened to Zaress's words with attention. After a moment, the elderly drake knelt down and raised her daughter's face upwards to look her in the eyes. Two pairs of slitted silver-green eyes met one another in the shade. “Look at me, Zaress of no family. Do you fight with honor?”

“Yes,” the drake replied. She could feel the judgment of her mother's gaze sinking deep into her skull.

“Then you have found the lesson you needed to learn in the sky and not the earth,” the matriarch told her, letting go of her muzzle. With difficulty, the old drake pulled herself upright and held her staff over Zaress's head. “Rise, then, for you are Zaress of no family no longer.”

Zaress pushed herself to her feet, now looking down at her mother.

“You are Zaress of the Rangers,” the matriarch announced. Dropping her staff, the old drake wrapped her enormous daughter in a hug. “And I welcome you to clanmeet.”

A cheer roared among the gathered clan at the restoration of their cousin – and she would be a cousin to everyone, former family or not. But she was welcome again. Zaress wrapped her arms gently around her mother's frail body and closed her eyes as tears began to fall down her cheeks.

The day before the solstice was still a time of setting up and preparing. Since Zaress had no family – within the system, at least – to assist or look after, she busied herself with doing odd jobs to help other members of the clan. She carried heavy things, staked tents, and walked elders about the camp. By sunset, she was hot, sweaty, and ready to jump into the oasis. Wearing just her shirt and some decent undergarments, the drake splashed in the crystal clear water of her homeland once again, wading and swimming. Back in the storytelling space, the bonfire was ignited by the breath of several clan warriors, and one of the more long-winded elders gathered the youths together to tell them the history of the earth clan, beginning from the days when the dragons ruled the world and the heroes of the four clans overthrew them.

Zaress climbed out of the water onto a small island in the middle of the oasis. It was little more than a patch of sand above the surface, built up around a tall palm. She sat down at its base, pushing her wet hair back behind her ears. The cut on her lip was stinging painfully after coming in contact with the saltwater. She ignored it and looked across the water at the bonfire roaring merrily, a glowing plume of smoke rising high into the starry sky.

A splash caught her attention and she looked to the side. In the gathering dark, a bright figure was wading across the cold shallows towards her. Kyress had been busy with patrolling during the day, and Zaress hadn't seen her since the trial. The warrior had traded in her weapon and hunting dress for a simple sleeveless tunic, the white fabric reaching down to her mid-thighs. Water streamed down her muscular body as she climbed onto the small island beside Zaress and settled down with her. The long-haired drake was clutching something in her hand.

“Not going to be with your family?” Zaress asked her, reaching out and running a knuckle slowly down the other drake's muscular arm.

“I am mother's honor guard tomorrow,” Kyress explained, “so they will have plenty of me during the elders' meet. Standing at attention all day, lovely...” She grinned at Zaress and laid a hand on her knee. “Besides, aren't I expected to spend time with someone else?”

“A male someone else,” Zaress reminded her, snickering.

“Very funny,” she replied, brushing her hair back from her bright blue eyes. “Mothering has never held an appeal to me... Anyways. Come on, tell me about what it has been like in the stars. You

have to have hundreds of stories.”

Zaress exhaled and shook her head. “I’m not sure I even know where to start...”

“Well, you will have plenty of time tonight to figure it out.” Kyress turned and leaned over the bigger drake. She reached around Zaress's neck and tied together a woven thread. It was weighed down by a stone spear-head, chipped beyond usefulness and then sanded to remove its edge. The pendant rest on top of the drake's collarbone, still glowing slightly from the body heat of Kyress's hand.

“What is this?” Zaress asked while Kyress was still leaning over her.

“One of my old spear-heads,” the warrior explained. “So you can take me with you when you leave again.”

Zaress looked up at the slightly smaller drake, admiring her blue eyes in the dark. Kyress's face was bright and hot as they pulled in even closer. The ranger snaked her paw around the warrior's middle and pulled her against her body. Their lips met and parted, and the two drakes fell onto the sand, reigniting a long-smoldering flame.

And after a moment they moved behind the trunk of the palm tree, so their heat couldn't be seen from a distance. They piled draken and corps-issued clothing on the sand beside them and made the best use of the time afforded by clanmeet as they could.

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The air in the *Stormbearer* smelled like home in the same way that the sun and wind of the planet had. Zaress stepped off the docked shuttle and onto the smooth floors of the starboard flight deck with a slow, comfortable sigh. She let her shoulders rest for the first time in two days. Travel was still not for her.

Though she still had plenty of shore leave left, she had come back to the ship to drop off her travel bag and other things. And to change into cleaner clothes. Everything she had smelled of saltwater and was covered in sand. Zaress heft her bag and walked past the check-in station bordering the flight deck and the rest of the ship.

“Cute necklace.”

Zaress paused, already knowing who she was going to see even before she looked. Rienne was perched on top of some cargo crates, wearing a white tank top and dark leggings over her wheat-and-salt colored fur. The drake instinctively reached up and touched Kyress's spearhead resting on her chest.

“Were you waiting for me?” Zaress asked, cocking an eyebrow. “How did you even know I was coming?”

“Call it a hunch.”

“I won't.”

“Suit yourself,” the fox replied, jumping down and landing gracefully on her feet. She fell in step with Zaress as the bigger drake began to walk again.

“Aren't you going to take some leave?” Zaress asked her.

“Nah, I'm on probation, so I'm not allowed to leave.” Rienne flicked her long tail behind herself. “So nobody even told me you left. How was it? You have fun?”

Zaress nodded. “Yes,” she said, touching the necklace again with a smile. “But honestly, I could really go for some seafood... Does the mess have any?”

“No, but there's some good stuff down on the station.”

“You said they didn't allow you to leave.”

“I didn't say I *couldn't*.” Rienne bounced forward and spun on one heel, a gleam in her green eyes. “If you want to go get changed, I'll find the boys. We'll make a meal of it.”

The drake smiled.

“I'd like that.”

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