

# ARIA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A FORMER SPACE PIRATE

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*This is my RPG character (see my avatar).*

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# 1 - HOMECOMING

AUTHOR's NOTE: I am developing the story of how Aria met up with various characters and leading up to where she now fits into the Star Wars galaxy. When I started with her, she had no history at all. She was just a SW "Former Pirate" template that I modified from the 6D system.

Well now she has a history: her mother's (Ariasha) history is only hinted at in this story, and her father's (Reissem) history is described more openly. I wrote up quite a detailed background on her mother in a separate segment. Bear with me as I edit this; I had it saved to different servers and because it was getting so long, it started to get errors when I saved it (too much spacing, etc). So I have copied & pasted it, but it's currently all de-html'd now: it's all in one big clump. I have a lot of editing to do. In the meantime I am not sure how fast I can work on this or not. But I will peck at it now and again. Please feel free to interject or give helpful comments, I am always open to ideas.?

## HOMECOMING

Two suns scorched down on a lone figure at the base of a dune. The figure straightened and removed a shawl, revealing a her face. After wiping copious amounts of sweat from her forehead, she gazed out across the immense horizon, the hazy line wavering in the heat. She then bent to continue her task.

Ariasha had almost finished connecting the last of the five refrigerator cylinders that had to be replaced when she dimly heard a voice over the sound of the welding. She lifted her visor. "Mother!" A tall, youthful girl, with her long braid wildly undulating, ran up the slow rise. "Mother!"

"What is it, Aria? What are you doing running all the way out here by yourself!?" The woman winced as she stood up, and shielded her eyes from the suns with a tremulous hand. "Can't you see I'm trying to fix this vaporator? I've got enough to worry about..."

"Sorry, Mother, I couldn't find any neighbours - and besides, I wanted to tell you! There was a message today from dad! He's gonna be here tonight!!" She said breathlessly.

Aria's mother shut off the torch. "What did you say? He's coming? Tonight?" She took off her hat to release an assortment of gathered braids.

Aria nodded excitedly, "C'mon Mother, let's go back and clean up the house!"

"How am I going to be ready in time?" Ariasha fussed. She fumbled to pick up her equipment and threw a large duffel bag to Aria. "Here throw this in the 'speeder and let's go!"

\* \* \*

Despite their speedy return, there was little time left to clean. Reissem Gunnir would be home any minute. Aria hastily shoved blankets and clothing in the washing room, and went to straighten up the modest visiting area. Meanwhile her mother cleaned up the kitchen and started supper. The tantalising smell of cooked meat and spices was floating through the air when they both heard the door slam.

"I'm HOOOOME, girls!" bellowed a familiar deep voice from the front of the house.

Aria made it to the door first. Reisseem dropped all his belongings on the floor and extended his arms.

"Father!" she tried to wrap her arms around his wide shoulders and laughed. "I'm so glad you're home! Tell me what you've been doing. Tell me what adventures you've been having while me and Mother slave away down here!"

"Plenty of time for that later," he replied and cupped his hands around her face, "You've grown again?" He put his hands on his daughter's shoulders, then grabbed her by the hand and twirled her around as she laughed. "You must've gained at least an inch in height since I last saw you. You are starting to look more and more like your mother... Speaking of which, where is - ?"

"Here I am, Re!" his wife answered, coming toward the steps to the landing.

"Ariasha!" He whispered hoarsely.

*Did his smile waver just now? wondered Aria. I guess Mother didn't limp quite so bad last time he was here. I guess it's been so gradual for me that I didn't notice, either, until now.*

Reisseem stepped down from the landing to his wife and pulled her into an embrace. "How have you been, my love?"

"Not bad, Re. Better now," she shrugged inside of his arms. "Are you hungry?"

"Am I hungry?" He threw back his head and laughed heartily. "I am! I'm just as hungry to eat as I was hungry to see my family! There's just one thing, though..."

The two women looked at each other. Aria's eyes widened, while her mother's narrowed slightly. "I'll show you," he said. He went to the door and pointed at it. "Do you have room for one more?"

Ariasha nodded. "Certainly," she smiled. "Is it one of your crew mates?"

"Yes. Now, don't be alarmed, " he said as he opened the door a crack. Then he opened it all the way.

A growling Wookiee filled the doorway...

Aria and her mother jumped and grabbed onto each other.

"I told you *not* to be alarmed, " Reisseem laughed, calming their astonishment. "She's quite friendly. In fact, she's adopted me!"

"Adopted?!" The girls chorused.

"Well, you see," struggled Reisseem, "That is... Well, I'll tell you all about it over some of that delicious supper I smell cooking!"

## 2 - HONOUR FAMILY

"You saved *her* life?" asked Aria with a mouth full of stew. "How? What happened?"

"Aria," her mother rasped. She shook her head at her daughter and chuckled. "Really, Re, I did raise her better."

"Heh! You're as messy as a Wookiee," he laughed and nudged Charlebbekka, who was busy shovelling chunks of gravy-soaked bantha steaks into her jaws.

Her great shoulders shrugged and she growled a lengthy phrase to Reissem. Her final grunt sounded a little indignant.

"Oh, really?" He asked the Wookiee. He translated for her, "She said she thought she was being very dainty. Sorry Aria. I should have said you're as dainty as a Wookiee."

Aria rolled her eyes at her dad, swallowed loudly, and then asked, "Well? How did you save her life?"

Reissem leaned forward in his seat, and looked around, as if suspicious of someone lurking nearby... Aria also leaned in eagerly, eyes wide.

Captain Rugar is quite a grouch. But then, I've never met an Aqualish who wasn't. He keeps the crew in line with fear and intimidation, or with promises of good plunder. However when Rugar sees red he sometimes gets himself and his crew into things they almost can't get out of. This was one of those days.

The heavily modified Dreadnaught, *The Tusk*, made an evasive manoeuver and turned tail.

"What in The Swamp are you doing, Ras?" He spat at his one-eared navigator. "You're supposed to go *toward* that ship, not *away* from it!!"

"B-b-but Captain!" The Rodian cowered, wiping some of the captain's saliva from his remaining ear. "It's an Imperial Landing Cruiser! Y-you must be mad!"

"If you think I'm mad *now*," hissed Rugar in the Rodian's ear, "Just *keep* going away from it."

Ras felt sharp claws dig into his shoulders.

Suddenly The Tusk turned about and headed toward the Imperial ship.

"That's a good boy," whispered Captain Rugar, patting the trembling Rodian on the shoulder. "You get to keep your other ear."

“They’re hailing us, Cap,” shouted a Phindian. “I don’t suppose you’d want to -“

“Of course I want to communicate with them!” Rugar bellowed. “Sishik! Target the main engines and weapons systems - and don’t forget to take out their troop compartment,” he howled into the comm system.

“Aye, sir,” a Verpine voice hissed in reply.

The Imperials, apparently confused, and thinking The Tusk had fled, were not prepared for the second onslaught. The engine was useless, and a few seconds later so were their communications and all weapons systems.

Rugar clapped his huge hand on Ras’ back, “Next time I’ll *order* you to make that “fleeing” manoeuvre. Brilliant, boy! The ‘Ras Manoeuvre!’ I wish I could give you back that ear, because you sure as the Void aren’t going to get a promotion!” He laughed madly. The Rodian joined in with a hysterical giggle.

A few minutes later, in a tremulous voice, Ras announced, “Sir, *The Tusk* has latched onto *Motherload*’s main cargo hold. The hooks are in and the drill has successfully breached the acquisition’s hull.”

“Set your blasters and your claws on ‘kill,’ we’re goin’ in, ” Rugar screamed gleefully.

He looked at his team with admiration, or at least I *think* it was admiration. He might have been wondering how they tasted with gravy. There were several different kinds of meat on board *The Tusk*: a Shistavanen, two humans, three Togorians, a Trandoshan and Sishik, the Verpine weapons specialist. “Okay, Gunnir, you lead this time.”

“Aye, Captain,” I said, grimacing under my armor. “Let’s go!”

Clamping to the ship’s docking shaft was not a problem, with the Imperial ship, *Motherload*, being immobile. Our drill is *very* specialized. Once it pierces through a hull, it opens up at the end and clamps outward so as to prevent a ship from pulling away - well, without pulling more of its own hull apart. Not only that but this mechanism also plugs up and covers any leaks that the drill might’ve made, and thus no one is in danger of being sucked out by the vacuum of space. The inside is like a hollow proboscis that we use to enter into an adversary’s ship. It was us physically trying to get *ourselves* inside the Imperial cruiser that proved a little more difficult.

Blasters started going off as soon as the drill-clamps opened.

Without any warning, Captain Rugar ran right into the fray and started shooting at everything that moved. I saw him revelling in joyful hysteria every time he heard a scream. The rest of the boarding crew hastily followed behind, giving cover fire as well as following up and finishing off. I shot an Imperial officer who was about to shoot my Captain, but someone still managed to take out a chunk of the Aqualish’s shoulder with a large blaster rifle. However, instead of falling, Rugar became even more enraged. He threw his blaster at his assailant, grappled him down and twisted the man’s neck until it made a snapping sound. Then he recovered his blaster and, leaving his victim conscious but unable to move, continued reigning as much terror as possible. Aargan, one of the Togorians, finished him off.

I called on two of my team mates. I said to the Shistavanen, "Gid! Come with me. Sishik, you, too. The rest of you, cover us."

Through the smoke and blaster fire, we took cover and made it to one of the larger containers in the hold. I don't think anyone noticed us going around behind the fray, what with Rugar's maniacal distraction.

"Sishik, do your stuff," I said. "Gid, you and me will go in when she opens the seal."

"Sounds good," replied the canine man. He grinned wolfishly. "I'm glad you're leading, today, Reissem. Last time that cowardly Rodian froze with fear at the first sign of blood. I had to drag his useless green hide off myself. Pretty unusual for a Rodain." He snorted derisively.

"Yeah, too bad about his ear," I said sarcastically, and put a hand over my own. "I guess there's no room for a screw up for me, either."

"Reissem," the Verpine rasped, clicking her mandibles. "The seal is open."

Me and Gid opened the large compartment. We had to pull back momentarily to recover from the smell that hit us like a freighter.

"What in the System were they going to do with all these Wookiees?" I asked, surveying the bedraggled contents. None were moving...

The wolfman shrugged, scrunching up his nose, "The smell of death. Not too freshly killed. Maybe bounty acquisitions being brought in. A botched slave run?"

A low moan forced itself through the pile of fur and blood.

"A live one!" I started pulling at arms and legs, trying to pull bodies aside. Suddenly I pulled an arm and almost fell back because I wasn't expecting such a light weight. I gagged.

"Easy, friend," said Gid, steadying me and patting roughly me on the back. "Look, we don't have enough time. Let's look in a different container before these guys get reinforcements."

"Sorry, it's just that," I gently put the little body down and turned my head in disgust, swallowing hard, barely maintaining the churning bile in my stomach. Memories of my dear wife and precious child flooded through me. "There are *children* here. Females as well as males. Why would the Empire kill babies??"

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out," Gid growled softly. "I'd like to get out of here."

"You go," I ordered. "I'll get the Wookiee. See if you can find something for yourself."

"Why?" The wolf-man asked. "Dead weight will just slow us down."

"It might come in handy later," I said, continuing my grizzly search. "Look, I'll explain later... Go ahead. *Go!* I'm *delegating*."

I struggled through the heaps of limbs, the images were... indescribable. I thought I could hear laboured breathing. Finally, near the back, buried under four other Wookiees, I found the one with life still in her, lying on her stomach.

"Hey," I knelt down and nudged her shoulder. "Hey, can you walk?"

She suddenly roared, and grabbed my leg squeezing it hard, trying to topple me over.

"Ah! Ow! Hold on! Hold on!" I yelped. "I mean, let go! *Let go!* I'm trying to get you out of here. You want to get out of here, right?"

She loosened her death-grip and made a weak, inquiring growl.

"Good, you understand Basic. Can you walk?"

She slowly pushed herself up to a sitting position, covering what looked like a nasty wound across one side of her body. When she tried to stand up, she nearly fell, and I tried to steady her. "Woah, lady. Take it easy. That's a nasty blaster wound there. What say we go to my ship and fix you up?"

The Wookiee looked at me intently and nodded, swaying slightly. Then we walked out of the container, me supporting the Wookiee, with some difficulty. She howled in pain, or sorrow, or maybe anger, as we waded through Wookiee bodies. The insectoid was waiting outside.

"Whew," she hissed. "I can smell why they had this thing sealed -Oh!"

When she saw the wounded Wookiee she looked at me with lowered antennae. "*What... are you doing?*"

"Just help me get her back to the ship when Gid comes back."

"But -"

"Never mind!" I glared at her. "*I'm leading the search, and I found something I want. The rules are you help me with mine this time, I help you with yours next time!*"

Sishik looked up at the ceiling with compound eyes and rasped, "Fine. Whatever you want. The blaster fire is slowing down somewhat. I think we should go back."

Just then Gid showed up with a bulky sack. "I've got a load of ship parts and some surveillance and communication components. Whatever else they have isn't worth much to us," he said, shifting the loot.

"Well now, I suppose I'll have to help you carry this... this..." Sishik grated.

"Yeah, yeah, just do it," I ordered. "Uncross at least a couple of your arms and use them to help me instead."

We returned to the scene, but our guys didn't look like they needed much help. Imperial officers of varying rank littered the hold. Some with their limbs. Some with their heads.

None with their lives.

"Looks like you finished," commented Gid. He saluted and put the sack of goods at Rugar's feet. "I think you'll be pleased."

"I'm rarely pleased," retorted Rugar. A Togorian was trying to bandage the Aqualish's shoulder. "Purrn, get away from me! You shed, and you'll get some of your mangy fur in my wound. Go look after our other wounded!"

I saw Cale, the other human, bandaging one of the other Togorian's laser-burned legs. The fur was burnt off and there was an angry red line running from the hip down to the knee. The Trandoshan was searching the bodies. The blaster mark across his snout didn't seem to bother him.

"Listen, Wookiee, let me handle this," I mumbled as Sishik and I struggled under the furry being's shoulders on the way over to the Captain. "It may sound insulting but some people only understand one thing, and that's if there's something in it for them."

The Wookiee nodded weakly.

I staggered a bit under her weight, and cleared my throat. The Aqualish turned suddenly and glared at me & Sishik and I thought his eyes were going to pop out and hit me in the head when he looked way, way up at our wounded Wookiee.

"Gunnir," snapped Captain Rugar. "Leave that meat behind. I told you before, we're not a rescue unit, we're pirates. I'm not going to warn you ag—"

"But Captain, sir" I spoke up. "I got her for the whole crew! You remember that there are a couple of things about Wookiees that might prove useful - to you. Right?"

Gid and Sishik gawked at me. They knew our dear Captain doesn't like to be interrupted.

"I'm listening," Rugar growled. I had a feeling he was either holding back or else his blaster needed new charges.

"You, being our wise Captain, must know that Wookiees are awesome trackers & navigators, for one thing," I said.

The Captain looked interested, and somewhat flattered.

"And of course you also know a lot are mechanically and technologically inclined," I continued. "And when their in tip-top shape they're fantastic fighters!"

The last point seemed to seal the deal. Rugar nodded thoughtfully.



"Well, clean her up then," he snapped and got up to go back to The Tusk. "The rest of you, let's go! And Gunnir!" he growled as he spun around to face Reissem again. "The next time you cut me off mid-sentence, I'll cut you off in your mid-section!"

"Understood, Captain Rugar," I said, with a little beads of sweat forming on my brow.

We reconvened an hour or so later in our meeting room. Captain Rugar had assembled the entire crew. He crossed his arms behind his back and circled the large room we were seated around, apparently lost in thought. He looked like he was in a good mood, for once. That wasn't necessarily a good thing, either, but you take what you can get with an Aqualish.

"You are here now because I want to bring to your attention," he said momentarily, "that this Wookiee we have on board will be an asset to the crew."

Several crew members nodded knowingly, some exchanged disapproving glances. Gid raised a furry hand.

"Speak," said Rugar.

"How do you propose she will fit in, Captain?" He growled. I shot him a look, but he ignored me. "I consider the tasks I do on this ship and with this crew to be very valuable to you. I don't want to lose my rank or assigned duties. You know I do great at what I do now."

"Oh don't worry, Gid, old dog," the Captain said slyly. "I have no intention of displacing anyone on this crew."

There was a collective murmur of relief at the table.

"Ras," called the Captain, in a sing-song voice. "Please stand up, won't you?"

The Rodian jumped to attention. "Y-y-yessir?" He nearly gibbered.

Rugar casually, in one clean and seamless motion, brought out his hand, armed with a blaster, and shot the Rodian through the skull.

"Well, now. There seems to be a position open for a navigation officer," he said mildly. The rest of us sat there, frozen in our chairs. Ras had been knocked over by the blast, and there wasn't much of his head left, except for what had splattered onto us. "Seems he met with an unfortunate accident with a blaster."

"Sishik, Gid," said Rugar, and then turned to two Togorians, "Purrn and Scrahg, get the Wookiee. And Cale, perhaps you could shove this mess out the airlock?" he added, prodding the green body with his boot. He added helpfully, "I believe there is a wetvac in storage somewhere."

Momentarily the four showed up with the wounded Wookiee, whose health seemed much improved. Her nose rankled, however, when she saw the ooze still dripping from the walls and our clothes. I was

surprised to see he hadn't shackled her.

"Looking better I see," said the Captain. "Yes?" He gestured to the being with his hand up. Without much regret in his voice, he added, "I apologize for the mess. Rodains smell rankly enough when they are alive and in one piece."

"I used that laser we re-acquisitioned last week to heal the wound," explained the Phindian who had doctored the wound. "The other damage she managed to live through will heal in due time."

"Well done, Woro," Rugar affirmed. He turned a calculating eye on the Wookiee. "You realize, of course, that you are indebted to *me*, Wookiee. You will remain on this ship until you have paid off your debt," he intoned. "I do not offer my services for free. And if you want to make trouble about it, I'm sure we could drop you off at the nearest Imperial correctional facilitation. Do we have an agreement?"

The Wookiee huffed and crossed her arms, but I caught her eye and winked at her. She nodded reluctantly.

Sishik raised a spindly arm. Rugar acknowledged her with a nod. She rose and held up a small gadget, which she handed to the Captain.

"Captain Rugar, Sir," she clicked, "Here is a translator I threw together for the Wookiee. I will eventually download this program into the main ship's computer."

"Excellent Sishik," purred the Captain. He took the translator and admired it. "Show me how it works."

"All you have to do is make certain this side," she demonstrated, "faces the Wookiee when she speaks, and the view screen is facing you. On the screen will appear an approximate translation of Shryywook into Basic."

"Good," he held it up to the Wookiee. "Well? You manage to comprehend Basic. Tell us your name."

She barked softly, proudly putting her fist to her heart.

"Crew, meet Charlebbekka," he said. "Congratulations, Miss. You are now our navigator. I'll see you on bridge tomorrow morning. The Rodian set us a course for an isolated moon before he quit, so we'll be able to rest well tonight."

I put up my hand.

"What is it Gunnir?" sighed the captain.

"Do you mind if I show her the ropes?" I suggested. "I know, more or less how the ship's navigation system works, and I'm sure she can catch on to everything else."

"Fine," said the Captain as he twirled on his heel. As he exited the room, he said over his shoulder, "She's *your* pet anyway."

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“Woah...” Aria pushed her plate aside. Her eyes had a faraway look. She refocused on the present. “What do you think Captain Rugar would have done if you hadn’t spoken up?”

“Probably would’ve either killed her or left her to die,” her father shrugged.

Charlebbekka paused between chews and gave his back a hardy smack, and then mussed his hair.

“Hey! Woah! No need to be *quite* so affectionate there, missy,” he said, coughing. “You nearly broke my spine!”

“Well, where is the translator now?” Aria inquired.

“She wanted to leave it behind,” explained Reisseem. “It sort of reminds her that she still owes Captain Rugar.”

The Wookiee chortled good-naturedly. Aria and her mother looked at Reisseem, waiting for a translation.

“Oh, it was nothing,” said Reisseem, looking a little red around the ears. “It’s nothing, I - what?”

The Wookiee looked at him for a half a second and then unexpectedly grabbed him, hugging him toward her, knocking his chair over. She proceeded to muss up his hair with her mouth twisting into a mischievous grin.

“AUGH! OK!” he protested, trying to escape the heavy embrace and the hair mussing. “I can hardly breathe! OKAY!”

Charlebbekka let go and the man tumbled to the floor. Aria and her mother looked at the Wookiee, then each other, mouths hanging open. They peered over the table.

“Can you see him?” Ariasha asked her daughter, concerned.

A hand appeared on the table, and he rose, with some difficulty, and rather breathlessly. His hair was quite messed with most of it sticking out straight up and in other directions.

“Uh, what she wanted me to say was,” he paused as he pulled himself onto his chair and attempted to flatten his hair down, “She wanted me to make sure you knew she doesn’t feel like she owes the Captain anything, because it was *me* who saved her. She is repaying this debt by protecting my life.”

There was a stunned silence. The women were looking at their furry guest with a mixture of disbelief and awe. Ariasha’s expression wavered slightly.

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It’s nice to know he’s got a friend like you when he’s out there.”

The Wookiee looked startled at this statement, but then bowed her head slightly and respectfully raised a glass.

Ariasha stood up from her chair. "Would you like thirds?" she asked heading toward the stove unit.

Aria heard her mother gasp, and turned to see her mother's legs fold beneath her.

Reissem's chair clattered on the stone floor again as he hastily stood up, "Are you okay? What's wrong? Is it getting worse?"

Just... give me a minute," she said stiffly, facing away from them. Fighting the tremors in her arms & legs, she began to get up, fists clenched in pain or embarrassment.

"Mother! Let me help you to the visiting room!" Aria pushed out from the table.

Suddenly Ariasha was aloft in big furry arms.

"Oh my! For heaven's sake," blushed the woman, looking down at Reissem. She turned to Charlebbekka. "I'm not helpless, I just lost my footing. It's nothing. Let me walk."

She protested all the way to the couch where Charlebbekka gently put her down.

"It's okay, love," said Reissem, sitting next to her and picked up her hand. "We're all related now! Nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not -" she checked herself from raising her voice. "I'm not embarrassed, I just..."

"I still don't understand this "family" connection to the - Charlebbekka," prompted Aria.

The Wookiee growled a garbled phrase.

"I'm what she calls "Honour Family," he translated. "I'm sort of her brother. And you're her niece!"

"And Mother's her sister-in-law!" laughed Aria.

A soft, throaty laugh shook Charlebbekka's fur. She put a heavy arm around the burly pirate's shoulder and drawled inquisitively.

Reissem looked startled. "Oh, we'll tell them about that later, 'Lebbie. I'd just like to sit around with my family and catch up on the news."

"What did she say, Father?" asked his daughter, moving to the woven carpet to sit by the furry guest.

"She just wants me to tell more stories," he smiled. "But, now, I want to hear some stories about you two."

The Wookiee's brow creased in confusion, but she didn't continue the conversation.

"Tell, you what, my friend," he winked. "Why don't you help yourself to some more stew?"

The Wookiee grunted an affirmative, but Aria noticed Charlebbekka let her gaze remain on her father for a few more seconds as she made her way back to the kitchen.

“Good news, ladies,” he said gathering his wife and daughter to each side of him. “I have some more money for you both. I even had time to, er, get you some gifts!”

“Well, now you’ll *have* to show them to us,” Ariasha admonished. “You can’t expect us to concentrate on conversation when there are presents!”

“Really? What an astonishment!” he grinned wolfishly. He rose briefly to grab the large backpack he had dropped at the door when he had first arrived.

“I worry about you, young lady,” he said seriously. “And I see that you are turning into someone strong and beautiful and, your mother tells me, brave. You can always use strength and beauty to get what you want, but here’s something for you when you get too brave for your own good.”

He pulled out a large bag and handed it to her. The weight surprised her. She pulled out two boxes and a heavy object wrapped in hide. She opened one container and pulled out a pair of slender black leather boots.

“Aw, these are slick!” she said enthusiastically. When she opened the next box she could hardly contain her joy. Without a word, she got up and immediately buckled on her new utility belt and holster.

Ariasha looked warily at her husband. She knew what was coming next.

“Oh, hey! What?” Reisseem asked sheepishly. “I think she’s ready, don’t you? I’m going to teach -“

“Oh wow, Father! Mother look! *Look* what he gave me!” She had unwrapped the hide and was now cradling a blaster in her hand. She saw her mother’s look of contention. “Mom. I promise - promise - not to use this until Father shows me how. For now, it’s just going to sit here in my holster. See? I put the safety on!”

Her mother closed her eyes.

“Oh please, Mother!” Aria went to her and kneeled in front of her. Clasping Ariasha’s hands in her own, Aria sputtered out every reason why she could keep the blaster. “Remember, Mother, when you told me I shouldn’t go wandering around on my own? But I don’t really have a lot of choice, sometimes, do I? And remember when we had that talk about boys and girls and how you said how much you worried about me? Remember when we went to town and those people were picking on us? Remember when we saw a Tusken Raider?”

“You’ve been wandering around on your *own*?” Reisseem looked sternly his daughter. He turned to his wife. “You had *that* talk? People were doing *what* in town? *Which* people? *Tusken Raider*?!”

Ariasha covered her eyes. “Alright, alright. I see,” conceded Mrs. Gunnir. “I guess you’re going to be needing one sooner or later. I was just hoping later, is all.”

Aria whooped and ran on the spot for a couple of seconds. Then she turned back and hugged her mother. "Thank you! I promise to be careful!"

"I hope so," sighed Ariasha.

"Okay, okay, Mother," Aria said excitedly as she went back to her seat on the floor. "Your turn! Open your presents now!"

Reissem smiled. "Yeah! You're gonna love 'em, my little raindrop!" he said, rubbing his hands together. He produced a smaller bag from his backpack.

Ariasha put her hand into the canvas bag and pulled out a glass box encasing a gossamer diamond necklace.

"*This...* is for *you* Ariasha. It looks delicate, but it's unbreakable. Like you."

She was speechless as he fastened it around her neck. She covered her mouth and tried to blink away tears.

He handed her a small box, and opened it for her. Inside were delicate, white shoes. "What am I ever going to wear *these* with?" she said, and pulled out a small parcel wrapped in colourful cloth.

Her husband watched her intently as she gently unwrapped it. She lifted the lid of a ornately carved wooden box.

"Oh, Re!" Ariasha sighed. "It's so delicate! Look, Aria!" She pulled out a full-length dress. Small, dainty diamonds accented the silvery fabric.

"Isn't that rather sheer?" Aria said, wrinkling her nose. "Where do you expect her to wear that?"

"Oh, it leaves *some* to the imagination," said her father. He waggled his eyebrows mischievously at his wife and then turned to see what his daughter's expression revealed. Ariasha giggled.

"Ugh!" their daughter groaned, sticking her tongue out.

"Never you mind, young lady," said her father, wagging a finger at his daughter. "I am taking Mother on a getaway!"

"What? But Father, will I get to see you, too???" cried Aria.

"Of course you'll get time with me!" he replied soothingly. "I have seven days - five days to spend with you, and if I keep my head down, another day after that! I kind of left the Captain with the impression that Lebbie and me were going on a mission to trade parts on the Black Market. Well, I gave him a rough idea about how long it will take to complete the task, you see. And he trusts me enough so that I didn't have to let him know exactly where I'd be."

"You're insane, Re," said his wife, as she hugged him tightly.

“Well, that does explain a few things, doesn’t it, love?”

“Will I be here all by myself?” Aria asked, brightening.

“Not to disappoint you, but me and Lebbie already made arrangements,” he said. “She said she’d be happy to stay here with you while your mother and me go off together. So it’s settled. Now give me some ideas as to what my two treasures have been up to the last six months?”

“Well, mother wants me to learn self-defence,” Aria stated. “She says she’s looking for someone to train me.”

“Is that so?” inquired Reisseem, and then looked at his wife. “Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Uh, well, yes and no,” was his wife’s reply. “I have a few people in mind.”

“Anyone I would know?” he probed.

“Um, no,” she said not meeting his eyes. “Look, are you finished eating? I need to clear the table.”

“Mm-hm,” he said raising an eyebrow. Aria’s forehead creased slightly at this strange exchange. Reisseem pressed on cautiously, “Weeell... Is it someone *you* know?”

“I, um,” she hesitated. “I haven’t really met any of the ones I sent queries to. I’ll let you know if I can, when I find one that seems appropriate.”

“Such a mysterious woman!” Exclaimed Reisseem, teasing his wife. He didn’t notice Aria looking at them with a quizzical expression on her face. “How often I seem to have these allusive conversations with you.”

“What are you two going on about?” their daughter demanded. “What’s going on?”

“I hope to find out, someday,” said her father, gazing fondly into his wife’s eyes. “She never keeps anything from me but her past.”

Ariasha reddened. Her daughter’s eyes widened, then narrowed.

“Yeah! That’s really true, ”she said, pointing her finger at her mother. “You always change the subject when I ask why you never talk about where you came from. What happened that you ended up here with Father?”

“You know how we met,” Ariasha pointed out. “I was working in a bar, and-“

”Yes, yes,” Aria interrupted, “Father rescued you. But what were you doing before that?”

“Nothing that either of you would be interested in,” she said evenly. “Go get the wine out of the cellar.”

“Mother!” Aria stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“Don’t worry,” assured Reisseem. “She’ll tell us the whole story someday. Won’t you?”

The question seemed more like a plea than a certainty.

“Maybe. But it’s in the past,” she replied. “Nothing like what is happening now in the present, your safe return. *That* is something to celebrate.”

Reissem drew his wife to him, and gave her a soft, lingering kiss. “And I celebrate that you two are still here to greet me,” he said meaningfully.

Then he noticed Aria still standing there, watching them. Her arms were crossed, but she didn’t seem as determined to cross-examine her mother anymore. In fact, Reissem noticed, she looked as though she might even be sad.

“Aria,” he said softly, winking at her.

“Oh. Right.” She uncrossed her arms and turned to get the wine.



### 3 - TRANSLATING

Aria was outside, with Charlebbekka, working on the repairs her mother had almost completed the afternoon before. She was glad her father and mother could be alone together for a while.

“Hey, thanks for coming with me, Charlebbekka,” she said, looking up from her work. “They obviously don’t like me to be alone out here.”

Charlebbekka nodded.

“I don’t know what the big deal is,” she snorted. “There’s nothing out here. At least nothing that will show itself at this time of day.”

She glanced at Charlebbekka, who was sniffing the air.

“Did my father tell you where he and mother went?”

The Wookiee shook her head, and pointed at something Aria had missed welding.

“Thanks, but I was getting there.”

She looked up at the Wookiee who had cocked her head to one side. “Okay, okay, you’re right, I missed it,” she admitted, blushing. “There how’s it look?”

Charlebbekka nodded and gave a thumb’s-up, growling an affirmative.

“I wish I could understand your language,” she said. “Do you think you could teach me?”

The Wookiee straightened, smoothed her fur thoughtfully for a second and then nodded. Charlebbekka pointed at herself and slowly let out a short sequence that sounded like, “Gggharr-yip-bark-ah.”

“Oh that’s how you say your name in... in... What do you say it in? Shryywook, right?”

Charlebbekka nodded and barked an affirmative, “Gharrirwoof,” she enunciated.

“Maybe start with what my name sounds like in your language.”

“Arrh-aah,” said the Wookiee, sounding it out gamely.

Aria smiled encouragingly, “Hey, that sounds pretty good! What about ‘blaster’?”

Charlebbekka made the appropriate sounds, “Gahrr-ghgh.”

“How do you say ‘shoot’?”

The Wookiee barked shortly and harshly.

“Okay, I wanna see if I can hear it in a sentence,” she paused in thought. “Can you please say ‘Shoot it with a blaster’?”

“Rah-grrrrrrr raawr arra ah gahrr-ghgh.”

“Okay, how about ‘Drop your blaster?’”

The lessons went on for about a half an hour. Aria finished up her repairs, snapping the security doors shut on the vaporator. She glanced up at her furry care-taker who was leaning limply against an outcrop of rock.

“Hey you look a little sick,” she observed. She pulled out her water bladder, “You better have some water. What did you do with yours?”

Charlebbekka responded by taking the cork out of hers and tipping it upside down. Not a drop came out.

“Sheez, Charlebbekka,” Aria shook her head. “I guess I can’t blame you, you’re not exactly dressed for climate. We might have to get you a bigger water container.”

The Wookiee growled mournfully.

“Here, you can drink some of mine, just leave some for the walk back.”

The Wookiee gratefully tipped Aria’s water bladder and drained a good amount.

“Okay, woah,” Aria pulled on her friend’s arm. “We have to share the rest until we get back home. Here, I think you need a little shade. Put this loosely over your head.”

Charlebbekka took the white cotton cloth Aria had draped across her head and shoulders. She made a protesting sound and shook her head, and made as if to give it back.

“No, no - it’s fine,” grinned Aria, pushing it back toward Charlebbekka. “I can tie my hair up and I have sleeves to cover my shoulders. You’re just... Well... You don’t have a lot of choice in wardrobe.”

The Wookiee made an amused sound and nodded. She placed the sheet over her head, and hung on to the corners to lift it so she could see properly.

Aria packed up her toolbox and motioned the tall furry being to follow her. She grinned up at her. “You sure don’t get quite the same coverage as I do with that thing.”

Indeed, the cloth easily draped over Aria’s head and over her shoulders and could be tied or clasped in the front, shawl-like. With the Wookiee, the cloth covered her head more like a hand towel.

“So it will be faster if we just head straight home, but if you start feeling over-heated, let me know &

we'll detour it through some shadier spots. It's still not the hottest time of day, so we should be okay."

"Raahhahh?"

"Yeah, it gets hotter here," said Aria. "In a few hours I wouldn't want to be out here in the middle of all this reflective sand, that's for sure. Then it gets hot underfoot as well as over your head. You don't have shoes, so I hope the pads of your feet won't get uncomfortable."

The Wookiee looked apprehensive.

Aria nodded. "Yeah, we'd better get moving."

As the two of them walked, Aria tried repeating back and reviewing the phrases she had learned. She asked her Shryywook language teacher questions in Basic. Charlebbekka would reply in Shryywook, which Aria attempted to translate back into Basic. The Wookiee laughed a few times, but mostly nodded and patted her young charge on the shoulder once in a while, encouraging her.

At first Aria asked general questions, like, "How do you like Tatooine?"

Charlebbekka growled & pointed a hairy finger at the suns.

"The suns...?" Aria guessed.

The Wookiee nodded. She pointed at Aria's forehead, & then raised her hand to her furry brow and pretended to wipe away sweat. She made a disgruntled sound as she did so.

Aria wiped real sweat from her own forehead, "Hot?"

Charlebbekka nodded mournfully, then she repeated the sounds in one entire phrase.

"The suns... are hot."

The conversation was like this, gradually increasing in length and complexity. At one point Charlebbekka snuffled and then barked out a coughing sound.

"My... *what* is going to burn off?" Aria mumbled. Then she grinned and translated: "Ah! 'My *fur* is going to burn off!'"

Charlebbekka growled and nodded. She seemed to be panting slightly.

"Look Charlebbekka," said Aria, putting her hand on her arm, "We're only about a half-mile away. Then you and I can have a nice long cool draught of water."

The Wookiee sighed with relief and nodded.

They continued the last while in silence. The Wookiee looked down at the youthful woman-child beside her with interest. Aria wasn't really focused on the path to the house, but rather her eyes were on the

ground. She didn't speak until they had entered the threshold and she had ushered Charlebekka into the visiting lounge.

"Here, you can start with this, and I'll bring out a pitcher," she said and went to the kitchen to fill one. On the way back she turned the cooling unit to full power.

By the time she brought the pitcher of water, Charlebekka had an empty glass and was wiping her mouth with some satisfaction. Aria refilled it and had a drink herself.

Both the diminutive human and the formidable Wookiee sat back, relishing the re-saturation of dry throats & the refreshing coolness sitting in their stomachs.

"Charlebekka - what is it my father calls you? Lebbie - may I call you Lebbie?"

The Wookiee nodded and patted Aria affectionately on the shoulder.

"I want to thank you first of all, for the language lessons," she said. "I don't think I've had so much fun in, well..." She shrugged, "Well, it's been a long time. I still remember a couple times I spent with my father, when my mom was healthier and I didn't have to look after her so much..."

She felt a furry finger pull some hair out of her eyes. She blinked, surprised at the wetness that suddenly sprang to her eyes. "Do you mind if I ask you a more personal question?" she asked shyly. Lebbie looked at her intently and woofed an affirmative. "My father doesn't tell me everything about what he does. I know he wants to protect me, but... I still need to know things. About my father. Anything at all."

Charlebekka nodded and leaned back, accepting this line of questioning.

"My father rescued mother. He rescued his captain," she said softly, looking down at the glass of water in her hand. "He rescued you."

She glanced quickly at Charlebekka, and felt rather than saw her staring intently at her, patiently waiting. "Don't tell him this, Lebbie," she implored sternly, her voice breaking. Lebbie wrapped a comforting arm around the girl and Aria edged in closer, hiding her face for a moment in the dusty fur. Aria looked up at the Wookiee. "But I sometimes wish he would rescue *me*, too."

The Wookiee gently slid an arm under Aria's shoulders, picked her up and placed her squarely across her lap, and wiped what remained of the tears on Aria's face.

"When you were alone, in the dark, in the storage container...?"

One of the Wookiee's eyebrows raised and she shifted in her seat slightly, but she nodded for Aria to continue.

"When you were there, and my father came to help you," she asked. "What did *you* feel?"

The Wookiee looked kindly at Aria and gently squeezed her arm. She growled softly and put her fist to her heart. Then she put her two fists together and made a motion as though she were breaking something between them.

“Your heart was... broken?” she asked, wrinkling her brow. “I don't understand...”

Aria watched the Wookiee's expressive hands as she pointed to herself; then pointed to a picture of Aria & her parents hanging on the wall. Then she pointed at herself again, pointed at Aria and then made a slashing motion with her hand. Aria swallowed a large lump that had formed in her throat with some difficulty.

“I'm so sorry your family is gone,” Aria said hoarsely. She embraced the Wookiee. “I'm so very very glad that you are part of my family now. I don't know what I would do if anything happened to my father or mother.”

The Wookiee was stunned and now it was her turn to lower her head.

“When you pointed at me, does that mean you had a daughter, too?” asked Aria, still with her arms around the Wookiee's neck.

Charlebbekka nodded.

“What was her name?” she asked, curiously. She got up and refreshed Lebbie's glass. Charlebbekka took a few sips and leaned back again and growled her answer.

“Your daughter's name was Jrllwra?”

Lebbie grunted and nodded. She pointed at Aria and growled another phrase.

“I remind you... of *her*?” Aria laughed. “How?”

Lebbie chuckled throatily, and began to explain. The Wookiee patiently explained until Aria understood that the Wookiee thought she and her daughter shared the same spirit. Curiosity and self-discipline and a sense of family convinced Lebbie that, had Jrllwra been alive and the two youths had crossed paths, they would probably get along very well.

“Wow,” said Aria. “That is...” She tried to think of words to describe how she felt. She gave up and just hugged her Wookiee friend again. “That is a great compliment. Thank you.”

There was a comfortable silence then, while the two of them just sat with their thoughts.

Aria looked at the time piece on the wall.

“Hey, after we grab some lunch, do you want to go into town?” she asked. “I need to buy some food for when mother and father get back.”

The Wookiee hesitated. Aria laughed at Charlebbekka's ruffled expression.

“It's okay, we can take the speederbike,” said Aria. “Have you ever driven one?”

Charlebbekka shook her head.

"It's okay," she said. "I can drive it. My mother showed me how."

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There were several visits with Charlebbekka and her father, and after some visiting with family, Aria was always keen to practice her Shryywook. When the two were out on a hike or an errand to Mos Eisley, she would tell Aria what really happened - some extra part of the stories that Reisseem would sometimes leave out, like the first time her family had met Charlebbekka. Even though the Wookiee would expand on things, Aria suspected Lebbie was still leaving out some detail, but she had a better idea of what her father risked out there. She knew he felt this was the most lucrative and quick way to keep up with the costs of looking after his wife; paying workers when Ariasha had bouts of pain and fatigue.

He had paid scientists and doctors with all manner of pirate booty to find out what was wrong with her, but no treatments or prescriptions or diagnosis seemed to help. Indeed, as time went on, Ariasha seemed to age a lot faster than normal, grew tired more and more easily, and sometimes could do nothing but sleep.

Her more concerning symptoms were muscle weakness, sometimes accompanied by seizures and debilitating pain. And the "attacks," as her mother called them, were never in any pattern. The sporadic nature of the disease made Ariasha decide she would begin to stick closer to home, where medication, neighbours and family were near.

Although it was never spoken, Aria knew her mother was never going to get better. When her father and Wookiee friend had conversations in front of her Aria could understand most of what was being said, even if her father pretended what Charlebbekka was saying something else. No one ever mentioned that Ariasha might slowly be dying, but it was a fear that sometimes came unbidden to Aria's mind. She noticed the anguished expression her father would have on his face when he thought no one was looking. Sometimes he would speak to Charlebbekka about his concern for his wife or about some upcoming missions when he thought Aria was out of hearing range.

Aria hid the fact that she could understand Shryywook from her father so when the two shipmates had conversations in front of her, she would hear and understand more of the conversation than her father was aware. The Wookiee had told her that she should tell her father soon, or *she* would. Aria said she would tell him, and made Lebbie promise not to tell before she got a chance to. "I'm just waiting for the right time."

Eventually, with Reisseem being quite an alert and observant father, he did catch on that Aria knew how to understand and even speak some Shryywook, however was quite a good sport about it. "At least you have someone else to talk to, when you and Aunt Lebbie go off on your walks," he said cheerfully. "Could come in handy, getting on a Wookiee's good side!" Little did Aria know, that there was a little more meaning in that statement than what was on the surface.

Every time Reisseem came to visit he commented on how his little girl was a little more mature and taller... growing up a little too quickly, but beautiful - tall and willowy, like her mother...

## 4 - GROWING UP TOO QUICKLY

Aria answered the knock at the door, and was surprised to see Charlebbekka standing there, her fur billowing slightly in the sandy evening breeze.

"Hey!" Aria jumped and embraced her tall Wookiee friend. "What a surprise! Welcome, welcome! You and -" She broke off her cheerful tirade when she noticed, first, the look on her Wookiee friend's face, and secondly, the gaping absence where her father's form was usually present beside his faithful compatriot, Lebbie.

"Where's father?" Aria asked, although her voice made it clear that she was horrified that she knew the truth. Suddenly sound seemed to muffle and vision seemed to dim slightly. She backed away from the door.

"Aria, who's there?" called her mother from the back of the house.

Aria stood frozen for a half a moment, her mouth moving but not forming words.

"It's nothing mother - you can stay in bed," she called back, hoping her mother would not notice the tremor in her voice. She struggled to finish the thought, staring desperately at Lebbie. "It's... uh, our neighbour... little Tannis has been looking for his sister, you know how she's always getting lost... If you don't mind I'm going to go help him find her."

"Tannis?" called Aria's mother, her voice sounding fatigued and worn. "Oh, yes, from down the road. Sorry Tannis, I'm not feeling well, or I'd help - you go ahead Aria, I'm just going to rest."

"Okay mother, I won't be long." But Aria stood, rooted to the spot, wishing time could stop and rewind.

Charlebbekka picked up Aria's shawl from the hook near the door and gently pulled her by the arm, and they left the dwelling.

Aria walked stiffly beside the tall Wookiee. Lebbie growled a concern, noting Aria's halting walk and alabaster expression.

"I... I'll be fine," replied the young woman. "I'm just trying to think. I don't know how I'm going to tell mother. How will I...?" The Wookiee helped her onto the family's speederbike.

From somewhere far away, Aria watched herself, moving mechanically, somehow getting onto the speederbike even though her limbs felt disjointed and heavy.

She clasped on to the back of Lebbie, holding on to big handfuls of reddish-brown fur and felt the movement of the speederbike as they headed smoothly to whatever destination they were going. She watched the ground blurring by, and wondered if that was how fast her father had seen her grow up, though she had hardly noticed. Flashes of memory came up through her otherwise out-of-focus

thoughts.

There was the time he came home in the middle of the night and took them all in orbit to watch the sunrises on the other side of the planet.

There was the wide-eyed tearful look of joy on her mother's face whenever he came home, so happy and young-looking that Aria almost forgot how sick her mother was.

There was the look of surprise and pride on her father's face when Aria had shot her first target with her new blaster: an empty bottle out in the desert.

There was the time she and her father went out for a ride together on a dewback - her first time on any ridingbeast. She sat behind him and held on tight to her father's shirt and they both laughed as they swayed and rocked on the huge beast's shoulders, and he taught her pirate songs.

Now... Now there was no time left.

Aria jumped slightly. Lebbie was growling and shaking her arm softly. Aria hadn't noticed right away, feeling numb and husk-like. The speederbike must have come to a halt.

"Oh, sorry..." she started. The Wookiee helped her off and she trudged on, with Lebbie leading her. "Where are we going?" She looked up and saw they had arrived at Chalmun's cantina. "Oh. Yeah, I think I could use a drink. I somehow... feel cold..."

This cantina had become a familiar place the last couple of years - at least for Reisseem, Charlebbekka and Aria. Chalmun's Mos Eisley Cantina was where Ariasha had met with Aria's mysterious martial arts trainer, and Aria had to be content, at the tender age of 13, to wait outside the cantina while her mother met with her potential trainer.

Now she worked as an assistant barkeep and sometimes waited and bussed tables. She had been introduced by Lebbie to Chalmun when she was 16, and since Aria was willing to work and seemed to be able to take care of herself, as well as knowing some good self-defense and being pretty handy with a blaster, she was hired. Aria worked at Chalmun's regularly and used it as an opportunity to keep up her Shryywook language lessons. Chalmun was a very understanding boss when it came to Aria needing time off to care for her ailing mother.

Charlebbekka and the now 18-year-old Aria walked into the bar.

Chalmun appeared to have been waiting for them. He waved them through to the back to a private room and brought them some drinks himself.

He said nothing, merely exchanging a glance at Charlebbekka, who nodded. He put a comforting arm on the young human's shoulder, returned the Wookiee's nod, and exited the room.

Aria took a sip of her drink and felt some colour come back into her cheeks. She leaned back in her chair, eyes closed, arms extended, palms face-down on the table.



"So... What happened, Lebbie?" she asked.

Charlebekka explained what had happened:

Reissem was leading the mission: they were to go in, find some crystals they were tipped off about, and take as many as they could, then hyperspace out. The usual. The Tusk pierced the hull, the party attacked through the impromptu portal. Only thing was, these weren't some ordinary run-of-the-mill miscreants or local authorities that were firing back. The ship they were attempting to heist had a contingent of fully armed elite stormtroopers: the Empire's Best. Apparently a scientist from Mrlsst was kidnapped and a band of Rebels was attempting to rescue him at the same time, using the 'acquisition' operation as a distraction.

Apparently the captain's 'reliable source' who had told them about the precious crystals on board had overlooked the small detail about it being full of Imperials on a completed mission that had involved harvesting crystals for a prototype weapon.

Blaster fire was everywhere, explosions, flying debris. In the confusion, Charlebbekka had, just for a fraction of a second, lost track of her human brother. She had turned around to find him, and found herself at almost point-blank range from a stormtrooper's heavy blaster pistol.

Everything after that microsecond happened before Lebbie's eyes in slow motion.

She heard Reissem yell in rage at the stormtrooper, and was helpless to stop the laser fire as he threw himself in between his Wookiee guardian and the blaster.

He lay dying in the Wookiee's arms as his last breaths left him. He grabbed hold of her arm, just like he had when he first helped her stand up when he'd found her in a containment cell under a pile of her dead kin. As Charlebbekka continued, Aria imagined what her father had said and how he forced out his last dying wishes...

"Please... tell them... I'm sorry... didn't mean to leave them... alone back there... Please... help... my girls..."

Not many crystals were found, but the ones that were found were quite large: a fortune.

"Where is... his body?" Aria looked at Lebbie across the table.

The Wookiee explained that the captain had let her take Reissem's body, and she had it on her shuttle, awaiting a proper funeral.

"I see," said Aria. She watched as Charlebbekka stood, and moved Aria's drink aside to gently place a dusty, beaten up old knapsack on the table between Aria's hands.

Aria suddenly felt her eyes get very hot, and pulled the knapsack toward her and clasped it to her, watching her tears spill onto it and spotting the dusty canvas.

After a moment or two, she opened the straps with trembling hands and reached in.

"Oh, Lebbie, thank you for this," she whispered. In her hand was a tattered picture of herself and her mother. "It was when we were both so much younger. It was before she started having the seizures. I think it was when I was six."

She pulled out a datapad. "Encrypted, no doubt," she said smiling faintly. "I'll find out what the code is." She pulled out sealed package, and opened it, revealing a long piece of silken material. "This is from mother's hair. She wondered where it went. It was one of her favourite hair ties. She always thought I had taken it and lost it," said Aria, chuckling and then struggling not to break down again. "It still smells faintly of her perfume." She paused, "I shouldn't be doing this," she stopped, put up her hands, abashed. "I can't open this without mother!" She hastily began packing everything back into the sack, when Charlebbekka, touched her on the shoulder. Aria looked up, questioning.

Charlebbekka unzipped a side pouch and pulled out a smaller leather bag, and deposited it in Aria's hands. She motioned the girl to open it.

Aria unzipped it and looked inside: even in the pale lighting of the backroom, something heavy shifted and glittered inside the darkness of the pouch. She reached in and pulled out two huge red crystals. She sat mesmerized at the reflections casting about the room. "Great Krayt," she muttered, drying the rest of her tears off with her other hand. "You weren't kidding. I can definitely help mother with this. I just have to find the right buyer on the market, and then I could get a medical droid full time for mother, and some other droids to help out on the farm..."

Charlebbekka looked inquisitively at Aria. "I plan to get off this rock someday, Lebbie, and this is my first really big break."

The Wookiee tilted her head and made an inquisitive sound. "I plan to eventually work like my dad," said Aria. Charlebbekka barked, waving her hands in protest and shaking her head.

"Yes, I am," barked back Aria hoarsely. "I always wanted to be with him. Now he's gone. This is the only way I know how to be near him now."

Charlebbekka grumbled, resigned. Then added something cautiously.

"Yes, I know I can't leave mother," Aria sighed, her shoulders fell. "I can't do this to her. She's lost him, and she won't want to lose me on top of that." She sighed. "Yes, I will have to stay. For now."

Charlebbekka pulled her chair over to Aria and encircled her with a furry embrace, drawling in Shryywook.

"Thank you. That's nice of you to keep me in mind for later... We can keep in touch and when I'm ready to join you, we'll hook up." She tried not to think of her mother's condition that would allow for when she would be free of this planetary prison. She looked at her chronometre. "I guess I'd better go back, it's been over an hour. Thanks for the drink. Do you want to stay with us tonight?"

Lebbie considered for a moment, then shook her head and explained.

"Yes, that's true. Perhaps you can stay somewhere else for tonight then, and then come over around

noon tomorrow?" The Wookiee nodded in agreement.

"Yes, I'll take care of mother and the two of us will look at this together, first," she said, looking down fondly and placing a reverent hand on the knapsack under her arm. "Thanks so much Lebbie. I know you kept him alive a lot longer than he was meant to. Are *you* going to be okay?" asked Aria, putting her hand on the Wookiee's head.

Charlebbekka's forehead touched Aria's and two great tears rolled down her cheeks and absorbed into her dusty fur. The two friends embraced once more, and then Aria gathered up her father's knapsack and went home as her friend waved to her.

## 5 - OUT OF THE KRAYT'S MOUTH AND INTO THE SPACE SLUG'S

Aria waited at docking bay 93, watching construction of some more docking bays through a cordoned-off area. Hovercrafts brought materials to crews waiting to weld and add circuitry. She marvelled that there was even any need to add more docking bays.

*Who would want to come to this planet? Or perhaps the better question is, who is crazy enough to think that there is going to be a sudden commercial or trades boom that would cause them to want to add more docking bays? What a waste. Aria knew that the money could have been better used somewhere else, because of her own situation and because of others less fortunate than herself. But she also knew where the money was coming from, so she wasn't surprised. That's the way it is on Tatooine; those with the power and the credits are primarily the Hutts or other scum. Why would they want to share any of that with the other inhabitants on this chlorophyll-forsaken planet?*

The sound of an incoming shuttle landing nearby grabbed her attention. It was Charlebbekka, come to take her away from this rock. There was nothing keeping Aria here now.

"Hey, you ol' furball!" greeted Aria, warmly. Charlebbekka gave Aria a Wookiee hug that pushed the majority of the air out of her lungs. Rubbing her ribs, Aria looked up at her friend with a rueful grin on her face. "So, I doubt you want to hang out on this hateful over-heated sandpile. You game to take right off again? I have all the stuff I own." She pointed at her meager luggage.

Charlebbekka's eyes softened somewhat, and she nodded, warbling something in Shryywook. Without another word she went around behind Aria and picked up her tightly-packed duffle and then headed back to the shuttle. Aria took one last look around her, and then wondered why she did, as she followed Lebbie up the ramp into the shuttle.

Aria settled in beside the Wookiee. "Nice shuttle, Lebbie," she commented. The Wookiee made a snorting sound. "Well it looks nice to *me*," Aria shrugged. "But I don't get out much."

Lebbie harnessed herself in and motioned Aria to do the same. Then --- lift-off.

Aria's stomach lurched momentarily and she felt her head sway as she saw the ground fall away, receding, and then the buildings shrank and she could see everything around Mos Eisley and outside of it including the horizon, all the creatures looking tiny and insignificant. The horizon fell away and it was nothing but sky, and a feeling as weightless as gossamer. She fought vertigo as they lifted nearly straight up and then shot forward, the planet pulling back on every bone in her body. Then there was the bouyant vacuum of space and the lightness of the atmosphere disappeared, and darkness was everywhere and infinite except for the pinpoints of stars that somehow were not consumed by this massive nothingness, spread out like shattered glass and diamonds. This was like the time her father had taken her and mother into orbit to see the sunrises.

Charlebbekka glanced at Aria's face and chuckled.

"What?" asked Aria, not tearing her eyes for one moment from the window in the cockpit. "Like I said, I don't get out much."

All too soon, it seemed, *The Tusk* came into view, and Charlebbekka shot Aria a cautionary glance. Aria took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Yeah," she shrugged. "I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I know all the stories about your loving Captain Rugar. Like we rehearsed: I'll just keep out of his way, stick close to you, and try to keep my big mouth shut. And I know, no huggy-cuddly-wuddily stuff while on board. I gotta act tough."

Charlebbekka nodded, and then punched the communique button and warbled a request for docking.

"Ah! Charlebbekka, you are clear to dock," a loud and boisterous voice proclaimed. "Welcome back. I understand you have some extra baggage!"

"I'll take that as a greeting," ventured Aria. "I take it you are the Phindian."

"Why is it that everyone guesses that before they even see me? Yes, Woro's the name. I take it *you* are the baggage: human, female, *Aria* -- Reissem's offspring."

"That would be me."

"Well, you sound nicer," said Woro. "Perhaps you smell nicer as well. Welcome aboard!"

There was a slight bump as the Wookiee maneuvered into the hold.

Aria followed Lebbie out into the hold and met up with Sishik the Verpine, who peered curiously at her with a many-faceted gaze, antennae quivering just over Aria's head. "Welcome to the fold, Reissem's offspring," she hissed, clicking her mandibles together simultaneously. "Rugar sent me to take you to your father's old quarters, and to basically... shall we say, size you up."

"I see," said Aria, keeping what she hoped was an even tone and stoic expression. "And what do you determine at first glance?"

"I see a female version of Reissem, much longer hair, toned musculature, composed expression, although somewhat elevated heart rate," she rattled off, as Charlebbekka and Aria headed down a narrow hallway. "But I am the wrong species to ask about any creature with a skeleton underneath a layer of skin. I find it intriguing that mammalian creatures spend so much tedious time tying up and decorating dead growths of hair as you do, as it looks cumbersome all tied up like rope and hanging down as it does. It looks to me like the first thing an enemy would grab to pull up your chin and get a good angle at your throat. I also wonder that, unlike my species, the mammals' females all tend to be more finely built and smaller-"

"And that's why the females developed *brains*," interjected Aria.

"Ah," Sishik murmured. "Perhaps that is the case. Here are your quarters. Charlebbekka is directly across from you. We have breakfast, such as it is, at 800 hours, if you are so inclined. The captain

would like to see you after he comes back from the Black Market, most likely tomorrow. Unless he finds the ale he was looking for, and then it may be an extra two or three days. I'll leave you to your own devices, as I am sure Charlebbekka can show you around as much as any of us."

The insectoid bowed her head slightly and left the two ladies at the end of the hallway. The door slid open and Aria saw her father's former room. As she entered, she heard her footsteps echo slightly in the nearly hollow room. It was washed clean, but a few remnants of his remained. *So this was my father's home away from home...* She thought, and turned around to get a full view of the room. It wasn't much bigger than their storage room back home, but she didn't care. This was where her father had been. On the small table beside the twin bed was a bandanna. *This must have been dad's.* She picked it up and put it around her neck.

"Hey Charlebbekka, this drawer has a lock on it," Aria said excitedly, attempting to shake the small cabinet. "You wouldn't happen to know where the-"

She laughed as the Wookiee produced the key and handed it to her. "You are a clever Wookiee, my friend," she grinned and tried the key. The drawer opened this time... It seemed empty, but Aria rapped the bottom of it and noted that it sounded hollow. *A false bottom, eh dad?* She looked up at Charlebbekka and smiled mischievously. The Wookiee winked at Aria. "Right, I'll figure out, um... where everything goes later." said Aria, not wanting to look under the compartment at the moment. She didn't want anyone else to find out about this. "Can you show me around *The Tusk* now?"

Lebbie chuckled at Aria's unabashed enthusiasm, but then her expression hardened somewhat. As the two began walking back from the direction they came from, Charlebbekka growled a low warning.

"Huh? Whattaya mean 'don't act *too* happy?'" Aria's brow rose. The Wookiee continued to explain. "Ah, because if I act too keen, they might start getting annoyed, or they might start giving me too much to do?" Charlebbekka smirked. "Ah... Both. I see. Right then, I'll try to look a bit more cool and detached. How's this?" She tried to make herself look bored, and was startled by the sound that Lebbie made. "Are you *laughing* at me? What now?" Charlebbekka wiped a tear away with a hairy finger and composed herself long enough to explain. Aria rolled her eyes, "Sheez, so now I look like a drugged Bantha... Should I try wearing a mask?"

Aria noticed the Wookiee stopped laughing and began walking in a more purposeful gait, so she tried to follow suit. She saw why. They were evidently heading toward the common area, where she saw Cale, the human, was playing Sabacc with Gid, the Shistavenen, and Woro, the Phindian, and a Togorian whose cards thrown face down on the table, had already folded. The other two feline Togorians were doing some sort of arm wrestling that involved pinning down each other's forearms, while Sishik and the reptoid Trandoshaan oversaw. All the ship's crew members were actively doing something, that is, until she walked into the room.

There was an awkward silence.

"Well, don't stop all the fun on account of me," snorted Aria, with what she hoped sounded like a casual tough-sounding grunt. She returned the penetrating gaze of the Trandoshaan. Charlebbekka barked an introduction.

"Yeah, we can tell she's Reisse's kid," said Cale, chewing on a piece of metal that he seemed to be using to pick his teeth. "Surprised you decided to hang with the gang, little thing like you. Your old man was tops in my datapad-"

The Trandoshan suddenly looked away from Aria and hissed at him, "*Really*, Cale?" the reptile's teeth revealed a hideous grin. He looked back at Aria and elaborated, "Personally, *I* got the impression that he wanted to kill off Reisse first chance he-"

Cale's large fist connected with the Trandoshan's eye. "'Scuze me, Karnic," he said shaking the pain from his bleeding knuckles, while the reptile snarled at him. "Don't be so *rude*," Cale snarled back at Karnic. He looked back down at Aria from where all six foot eleven of him stood. "Yeah, I'll admit, I said that when I first saw 'im. But we *all* say that about *everyone* new face who comes aboard... Present company excepted, of course. So no hard feelings?" He offered a friendly handshake to Aria.

Aria looked at the proffered hand and grabbed it, intending to shake it, but was caught off guard when he yanked her toward him. Off-balance she fell toward him and he skillfully spun her around so that she leaned back against his chest. "Easy there, Big Sis," he growled at Charlebbekka whose hackles were raising. "I just want to get to know the little lady."

"Of course," Aria sighed. She rolled her eyes and grimaced, smelling rather than feeling Cale's ale-sodden breath in her ear. "I should be more careful. Fortunately," she said as she shot back her elbow into Cale's stomach, winding him, "My father told me..." And then brought up her fist into his eye, "...*all* about you!" She turned and saw him bending over, one hand clamped over his stomach and another over his eye. "And now that we've gotten to *know* each other..." she finished off her sentence with a quick kick to his groin.

Cale crumpled onto the floor, squinting. "Point taken," he gasped from his fetal position on the floor. "Truce."

After a silent heartbeat of astonishment, laughter from the rest of the species erupted. She turned to look at the group at the tables who were hooting and cheering. Charlebbekka smirked, crossed her massive arms, and nodded in approval. One of the two male Togorians planted a large stein of some sort of foul-smelling ale down, and motioned for her to sit there. "Hyah! It is not often that, anyone, let alone such a small human like yourself, can put Cale in his place. We need a fourth for Sabacc," he growled, but to Aria it sounded like he was trying not to laugh too hard. "Please honour us."

"Well, I'm willing to learn," she said gamely. She wondered if any of these brutes knew how often her father and Charlebbekka played Sabacc with her. "How do you play?"

## 6 - RUGAR'S ARRIVAL

Aria lay in bed in the darkness of her father's former room on *The Tusk*, reflecting on the evening before. All this newness made her mind race, so when she had woken up earlier than she had intended, she couldn't get back to sleep.

The Aqualish captain hadn't come back yet, so the ship was still in standard orbit. *He must have found that rare ale on the Black Market*, mused Aria. The crew stayed up late into the night, some of them playing Sabacc with Aria. The rest watched with growing amusement as her opponents seemed to win heavily for a while, but then later they desperately trying to win back their credits from her as her pile of acquisitions grew. Eventually, they wised up, and she admitted that she *may* have had one or two card games with her father before, and that he *might* have given her a few pointers.

She learned that the captain was so suspicious and paranoid about anyone finding out the source of his favourite ale that he hired bodyguards from the surface rather than taking someone from his longtime crew. *Probably some Hutt Lord, who killed several beings just to possess it*. She took the time she had to learn all she could about the beings she was going to be spending an indefinite amount of time with. Some of the crew was displaced by the Empire and had no other place to go. Others originally appeared to have been hired by Rugar as body guards or mercenaries, and then decided to stick it out a bit longer, take their chances and gather some pirate treasure. For some of the crew, like the Wookiee and the Trandoshan, and possibly Cale, they seemed to have no where else to go as they seemed to be wanted all over the galaxy from various authorities. From the other tales they told her about their captain, she knew she should prepare herself for anything.

"You best be on your worssst behaviour when he comes back, young missss," Karnic had hissed. "He seems to hate humans the mossst of all the species because he believes them to be weak, but he will put up with them if he thinksss they can be of use to him. You will be no used to him if he thinksss you can be pushed around."

The Verpine leaned in toward her as well, "You should be fine, if you are anything like Reisseem. Just remember... Whatever your strategy, *never* act meek," she suggested. "Although he and his kind prefer everyone to do what he wants, he detests signs of weakness. Hold his gaze when he is addressing you. If you feel he is about to attack you, the best way to disarm him is to pander to his ego."

Aria had revelled in this show of comaraderie. It meant that the crew had accepted her and they wanted the captain to keep her aboard.

Aria knew Lebbie's story, and she knew that Trandoshans and Wookiees typically do NOT get along, especially because of their past histories. In the past Trandoshans hunted down Wookiees like game for Imperial bounty. Lebbie didn't seem to hold any ill will toward this particular fellow, so she tried to glean some information from him. Karnic told her little, other than that he chose not to be present during the Shryywook massacres, and that he had other business that got him into plenty of other kinds of trouble.



He would not disclose much else, unless it was about his present role on *The Tusk*.

Cale, sporting a small cut on his eyebrow and a black eye, with gauze up his nose, seemed not to take offence at his bruises. He said the pirate-brewed still-flavoured alcohol he and his mates manufactured was numbing the pain. She wondered if that was the only pain he was trying to dull, as he seemed to need a lot of it. He did seem to feel better when he wasn't losing his credits to her in Sibacc, and others were. Instead of congratulating the winner of the Togorian wrestling matches, Cale tended to laugh and make fun of the loser. Aria wasn't sure if she really liked him, as his mood seemed to lean toward sadistic joy when someone else was doing worse than he was.

She learned the names of the Togorians. All three of the huge cats were siblings, and had similar grey coats with black stripes. Purrn was the largest, standing at least ten feet tall, and had a tuft of white fur on his forehead, whereas Scrahg did not. Schrag had a slightly darker coat and was wider in the shoulders than his brother, but stood perhaps nine feet tall, whereas Shask'rr, the female, was a "mere" eight feet tall and somewhat smaller in build, and also didn't have as much facial fur or a mane, but Aria supposed she was just as lithe and deadly.

Purrn and Scrahg's method of arm wrestling wasn't one Aria was familiar with. They stood, rather than sat, at a heavy-looking table which was bolted down to the floor. They hunched over it with their claws retracted. They stood on their sides of the table, staring at each other without a flicker of whisker or twitch of ear. Their sister would give a signal and they would, with sudden movement, attempt to pin the other's forearms against the table top. The object of the match was to pin the other's arms down. It got quite spirited sometimes, and in some cases one or the other would end up twisted around with his back on the table, feet off the ground, pinned to the table. Shask'rr explained, as Aria watched them, that they restricted themselves to arm wrestling instead of an all-out match. For Togorians, like Wookiees, to use claws and teeth when not fighting for food or in defense was considered dishonourable. The point was to see who was the fastest, most cunning, and strongest -- not who could inflict the most lethal wounds.

"Why just arm wrestling?" asked Aria. She watched their fierce expressions. "They sure *look* like they would prefer full body contact!"

"Do you think it would be wise to use our full strength, pouncing abilities, and weight in *this* tin can?" Shask'rr made an odd sound between a snort and a purr. "We save that for when we are on solid ground. They did try actual wrestling... Once."

"Yes," said Sishik, irritably clacking her mandibles together. "And it took me forever to repair the damage."

"What do you mean '*you*'?" laughed the Phindian, nearly spitting out of the ship's brand of vile brew. "It took every one of us a standard week to knock the dents out of things, re-wire, weld, re-program, replace... You," he said pointing one of his right index fingers at the insectoid, "stood there and told us all what to do, if I recall! Kept pointing in all directions with all your limbs!"

The Phindian, of course, was himself. He seemed quite the jolly fellow, loud and boisterous. He boasted that having four arms allowed him to shoot to kill while he could, at the same time, perform life-saving surgery on someone, and then launched into several stories wherein he had done very nearly that. Some of his mates who were listening grinned wickedly and nodded, while others laughed and

rolled their eyes.

A knock on her door startled her out of her thoughts. She smiled when she heard Charlebbekka growling a morning greeting.

"Yeah, I'm up," Aria said, and wrapped herself in her blanket to answer the door. She let her friend in. "I suppose it's not exactly one hundred percent safe to change clothing unless I am under the covers?" She smirked and motioned her head toward a small hole high up on the wall, just below the ceiling. She had done a thorough search of the premises before coming to that conclusion. "I took down that camera, but I may have missed another one somewhere."

Charlebbekka snorted in disgust and suddenly disappeared from the room. "NO Lebbie! It's okay!" she hollered to down the hallway. "I don't care!" She shook her head and gave chase to the galley. Already Shask'rr and Woro were attempting to hold back and calm down the giant forest dweller, who looked terrifying with her fur all bristling and teeth bared at Cale. *He* was wearing his breakfast and was just getting up off the floor. He had a hand over his eye, the same one that Aria had left a fist print in the night before.

"Couldn't you have at least hit the OTHER eye??" He whined. Charlebbekka made as if to grant him his wish. The Togorian and the Phindian, although under intense strain, seemed to just barely manage to hold her back.

"Lebbie! Lebbie, look at me!" demanded Aria. The Wookiee, with great will power, tore her concentration from the man getting up off the floor and turned to look at Aria. "*Stop it*, will you?!" Aria tried to look as mean as possible, and although she had never witnessed her friend in that much of a fury, she risked going as close up to her face as possible. Since the Wookiee was leaning forward, she was almost at eye level, so Aria yanked over a chair and stood on it. "Settle down, right NOW, lady!"

Charlebbekka reluctantly untensed her muscles and stood up, and Woro and Shask'rr tentatively let go. "Thanks Charlebbekka," sighed Aria, "But if you don't mind, I would like to at least try to deal with these things my way first." She lent a hand out to Cale who grasped it, and helped him up. "Sorry about that Cale."

"What in the Core was that all about?" he said, sitting down again.

"Cale," said Aria, sitting down next to him. "Did you hide the camera I found in my room?"

Cale looked annoyed and yet somewhat sheepish, "Ur... Ummm... You see, that is...." He faltered even more when he saw Shask'rr narrowing her eyes. She flattened her ears back against her skull and crossed her arms. He shrugged and then threw up his hands. "Look, I had to *try!*"

"So, you admit that you did install a camera? In *my* private quarters? To *spy* on me? And you didn't think I would be smart enough to figure that out?" said Aria, her tone getting more and more poisonous. Cale's eyes swivelled from the Wookiee glaring at him back to the stern young lady beside him and nodded slowly, shoulders hunched. "Don't do it again," she said. She pointed a finger in his face, and lips a in a single tight line, she moved her face closer as well. He winced as she snapped, "*Don't....*"

"Well, well, well!" a heavy voice that rasped with gravel suddenly made everyone's do an about-face toward the ship's hold. It was Rugar who had come from the ship's hold, swaying slightly against the support of Sishik and Purrn.

Everyone hastily stood and saluted, Aria following suit. Rugar seemed to be at a point somewhere between just waking up or going to sleep after a long 24-36 hours of drinking and intense partying. Aria wondered if he looked hung over, or if he always looked the way he appeared now. His eyes seemed very glassy and it was difficult to tell if he was annoyed or amused by the scene he had walked in on.

"I see we have a stowaway," he growled and pointed a wavering finger at Aria. "Who in the System are you?"

"Aria Gunnir, *sir*," she replied smartly, stepping forward from the others. "I'm filling in for my father, captain. I'm here to take over his duties."

He appeared to mull this over, and swayed a bit from side to side, as though he might also tip over. "Well, then," he snarled, "I will consider what to do with you," he said grabbing hold of one of Sishik's limbs. "That is, after... I have some time... to think it over."

"Aye, captain," she said, saluting again.

On his way to his quarters, as he passed the bruised male human, he did a double-take. "What happened to you, Cale?" he demanded. "Getting into trouble with the Wookiee?"

"Uh..." Cale hastily cast a sideways glance at Aria, who narrowed her eyes at him, but said nothing.

"Nevermind," he snorted. "I will have a talk with you two, after I deal with... this..." he looked back at Aria with what may have been a distasteful look on his face, but it was hard to tell as he already looked distasteful. "Come with me, Sishik."

"Yes, Captain," the Verpine said, holding out one of her four arms. The other three were laden with baggage. All the baggage, including the Quaran Aqualish, were led away.

After he had been led to his quarters, the tension in the room deflated. Everyone exhaled and either sat down or leaned against something. Some appeared slightly disappointed. Cale, at least, appeared grateful that Aria hadn't mentioned their disagreement, she guessed because it would have made him look bad.

"Well, what's to eat?" asked Aria. "I would prefer a full stomach when I'm learning what to do around here."

Lebbie responded with a nod and a grunt and disappeared into the kitchen area, reappearing a moment later with a full plate for each of them of what appeared to be eggs and some kind of toasted bread. Aria stifled a chuckle when she saw the huge heap of food on her friend's plate, but knew that the Wookiee more than likely was holding back. Aria tucked into the fare herself, "Hey, this is good," she said. "Who's the cook?"

Cale raised a hand half-heartedly, the other hand still nursing his eye. "We take turns."

"I see," said Aria, surprised. "I guess I better learn how to cook, too."

The Verpine came back shortly. "Aria, I see you are almost finished," she bowed. "I suggest that you at least familiarize yourself - and perhaps rather quickly - with anything on this ship that you might be able to assist with. Rugar is sleeping now, but I thought I best warn you that when he wakes up, he will want to have some idea of your usefulness on this ship, besides using up valuable space and eating valuable supplies."

"Got it, Sishik," said Aria, finishing off her breakfast. "You ready Lebbie?" The Wookiee had taken the trouble to tip the contents of the plate into her mouth, and therefore it appeared as though she was done about the same time. Aria followed her mentor to the engine room and wasn't surprised when Sishik arrived a moment later. The giant insect looked startled to see them there.

"We meet again? So soon," she said rattling her antennae. Sishik continued in a tone that Aria was sure was meant to be sarcastic, "To what or whom do I owe this pleasure?"

"Well, Sishik," said Aria, keeping an even tone. "I'm fairly talented with fixing things. Us farm girls need to know how to weld and solder; fix components of systems - both software and gears and such; plus maintenance, tune-ups, and upgrades... And sometimes if something breaks or runs down it can be days, weeks or months before the correct parts come in from somewhere, so I know a bit about jury-rigging, cross-referencing, rewiring, substituting parts, reconfig-"

"Enough!" said Sishik, putting all four hands up. "I see you have plenty of experience. Perhaps I can ask for your assistance with fixing the wiring that leads from the engine to the regulator. There appears to be some damage from our last... hm.... mission, wherein we just managed to hyperspace out of target range of a missile. We missed most of the explosion, but something still breached our hull and some parts fell down onto the wiring, and if you look in a few places along the wires, such as here..." She pointed with a hair claw at some areas to illustrate her point. "And here... Anyway, you seem bright for a being of your species so I'll let you have a look."

Charlebbekka indicated that she would be in the ship's hold for the time being, so she parted. Aria got to work. She located some gloves that fit her human hands, and, with tools from Sishik's supply, she did some wire-stripping so she could twist some wiring together. She even did some sautering to reconnect the wires to one of the motherboards. When that was done, she asked for approval from the insectoid, who carefully inspected. From that point she was asked to see what was wrong with the venting system, which Aria discovered turned out to be a filter needing replacement.

"Very well done," commented Sishik. "These were simple tasks: we haven't fully tested you out in the engine room or other ship repairs, but you definitely have proven to me that you have an aptitude for it. If need be, I will be happy to make Captain Rugar aware of this."

"That would be greatly appreciated," grinned Aria. She took off her gloves and headed toward the ship's hold to see what Lebbie was up to.

(under construction)

