

STAR BEFORE THE HAMMER FELL WARS

By Jack Freeman

(Bale Andros - 826)

Entry for the So It Begins competition:

<https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/competitions/15793>

The crack of a massive green fist against her jaw sent Raeleen Andros staggering back, her world a strobe of flashing lights and dancing black dots. Digging the balls of her feet in the sand to keep herself from falling, she shook her head in an attempt to chase the dots from her vision even as her bandaged fists came up to block another strike. She had to admit that she'd misjudged her Gammorean adversary. She expected him to be half as fast and twice as obvious in his attacks but she couldn't have been further from the truth. He was surprisingly quick for his size, and he knew how to fight. As he stomped towards her, the jumble of green lard, warts and sweat bouncing about her vision, she regretted the previous night's drunken stupor.

She dodged right as the hog jabbed, rolled left under his hook. She should have swept his leg sending him crashing but instead she was scrambling out of the way, the fast dive sending her skittering on all fours. She rolled out from under the swine's stomping foot back to her feet then ducked just in time for his backhand to swat the air above her head. His arms went wide as he lunged to grapple her but she cartwheeled out of his grasp, putting fair distance between them and forcing a break in his onslaught. The Gammorean squealed and thumped his fists against his chest, sending a ripple down his round belly. Growing increasingly aware of the metallic taste in her mouth, she spat.

Blood.

She shot the hog a vicious grin and wiped flecks of red spittle her chin.

"Good hit. Bet you can't do that twice!" She spoke loudly, her trademark growl thundering across the arena. The spectators went wild, cheering and bouncing in their seats, pumping fists, hooting and whooping and spouting obscenities at her opponent. The Gammorean's green, bloated features went a dark shade of purple, so much so she thought he might explode. She could bank on two things on any given night, hangover or not: the crowds loved her and her adversaries loathed her for it. "See? They like these odds."

That was too much for him. He broke into a sprint with a guttural squeal, head down, tusks out, charging straight for her, kicking up a cloud of sand in his wake. He came at her with speed that belied his fat frame. She dug her feet in, stood facing him with her back straight, chin out in defiance. His shadow swallowed her whole. He was playing right into her hand and when he realised it, it was already too late. To

the onlookers it may have looked like the Gammorean trampled Raeleen and the collective gasp that ensued was like a crack of thunder in the arena. The swine's momentum took him a dozen or so steps past where Raeleen had been standing. He skidded to a stop, turning in time for the blinding dust cloud to overtake him. Silence fell over the crowd. The air was electric. The Gammorean was panting hard. That's when Raeleen struck. She honed in on the wheeze of his breath then burst out of the cloud with an ear-splitting roar. The swine, caught by surprise, tried to dodge but her heel popped his chinless gob towards the ceiling. She kept with him as he fell back, rolled, kicked off the ground into an airborne punch that came down on his windpipe with a sickening crunch. Her feet touched the ground only long enough for her to somersault forward onto his chest, her momentum drove him sprawling to his back with a resounding thump.

The Gammorean thrashed on his back as he clawed at his throat, a rasp whistle in lieu of his usual porcine squeal. His features were turning purple again but this time it wasn't rage. It looked like her punch had done permanent damage. She'd have felt sorry for the fellow—and she did feel the guilt, somewhere deep down at the back of her mind, locked behind the walls of her mental fortress—had she not been through this song and dance a hundred times before. Such were the risks of pit fighting. This poor sap wasn't getting back up, there were no two ways about it and she had to remind herself with grim satisfaction that at least it wasn't her lying there in a pile of her own filth. She had no illusions about it, though. Her turn would come some day.

She slapped on her best, most feral smile, cartwheeled and pumped her fist at the crowds, roaring and stomping, unleashing the maniac in her. Thunderous applause rippled through the arena, hundreds of voices hollering. They mocked and they chanted as the Gammorean choked on his own blood.

These bloodthirsty *sleemos* loved her.

She hated them. All of them, and this whole rotten place too.

But at least she loved the attention.

Amos Farstrider slumped down in his seat letting his datapad drop onto his lap. *Blast me*, he thought as the spectators bounced around him. *That was a week's pay I just lost*. He suddenly felt tiny sitting there despite the fact that he dwarfed any one of them standing up. Some drunken kid bumped into him, sending the datapad clattering into the stands. He just watched it tumble out of sight then gave the mortified kid a shrug. He reckoned a missing datapad would be the least of his worries when he told the captain that their Gammorean deckhand had gone and got himself killed by some *mine-rat* in some clandestine pit fight. Amos had been so certain the burly *karker* would make child's play with that Zabrak lass. She was a fraction of his size and with a stage name like the Iridonian Witch, it all reeked of amateuristic whimsy. Boy, was he wrong. Now Gatogg was dead and Amos' credit account was a couple drinks shy from drying up. He watched dejected as the Zabrak pranced out of the arena all while some thugs scampered to retrieve Gatogg's body, a futile notion for just two of them. They tried, but they'd have to wait for help. Amos didn't stick around to watch. The inkling of an idea was already forming at the back of his mind.

He made his way through the tunnels that made up the living area of asteroid mining outpost O-1315, stopping only for directions. As he walked, he studied the folks filling up and down the corridors. They were a hardy lot, these miners, all filthy with ionized dust, but they seemed in good spirits, though that may have had more to do with watching a local beat the ever living Force out of some outsider. Call it worker pride. He figured there wasn't much difference between his life and that of these here miners. They spent most of their free time staring at durasteel walls, him on a freighter, them underground. Their days were spent working *dwang* jobs for a *dwang* pay, all that to likely get killed before the week was out. He reckoned at least he got to see new worlds.

It couldn't all be bad.

The rhythmic *thump thump thump* of high octane music told him he was coming up on his destination before he saw the neon signs and flailing drunkards. He rounded a corner and walked out onto a surprisingly massive courtyard. The club rose up to the transparisteel roof that gave a rare glimpse of the void outside. Strobes and lasers lit up the facade sending a three-dimensional rippling effect across its surface that, oddly enough, reminded him of Gatogg. He'd expected some

seedy dive. This was something else. What he found was a bustling nightclub so packed that revellers were pouring out onto the streets. At least now he knew what folks out here did for fun. Now he just had to figure out how in the blazes he was going to get in there.

“E chu ta, Rael! That fight was wild!” Meekoo shook Raeleen by the shoulders, the Rodian bouncing up and down behind the pit fighter like an overexcited Massif.

“She’s right,” another of Raeleen’s retinue added, “No two ways about it! Xorrixor’s got to slap you with a big fat bonus now!”

“Fatter than the hog, I hope,” Raeleen said before she buried her face in her cup. The music hammered at her skull again and again and again, harder and harder, *thump thump thump thump*, to the point where she considered calling it quits for the night. The days in the mines, the evenings in the arena, the nights drinking, it was all a blur and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d bunkered down and caught some good ol’ shut eye. Then Sleeker showed up with the latest round of stimulants to make their way to 0-1315. Raeleen stuck some up her nose, then she was as good to rip the dancefloor anew.

When she threw herself back into her seat a good hour later, she was all pomp and laughter, bouncing between bravado and showmanship as she entertained her compatriots. The Iridonian Witch was a woman of the people after all, and she enjoyed nothing more. The night’s fight got swept by the wayside as she ran through a retelling of her greatest hits, showing off scars and bruises like they were trophies. Somewhere at the back of her mind, deep inside the vaults of her mental fortress, there was a semblance of shame simmering, but that shame never made its way up. They’re love was fuel to the fire that burned in her heart. She made crass jokes, cracked a fool with wandering hands across the skull, danced, cracked another, then danced again. This was a good night.

Then she found herself alone at her table and *he* showed up.

He was a mountain of a man, taller than anyone she’d ever met by a good head or two. His broad shoulders cast a shadow over her as he sat down across from her and slid a drink in her direction. Her eyes shot to the rippling muscles, his

short-sleeved shirt doing nothing to hide his body. Not even the sleeveless vest could take away from it. In fact, it enhanced his physique that much more. She had to bury her face in her new drink to keep herself from biting her lips. Her eyes swept up to his broad ugly-yet-handsome face. His features were harsh. The greasy black mop atop his head and the scrappy beard did nothing to soften his demeanor. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was that called to her. She decided she liked him well enough to let him speak his piece before she blew him off like any other brave numbskull that approached her.

He sat back with all the nonchalance of a grazing bantha, slapped a big blaster down on the table and threw his head back downing his drink in one loud gulp. It didn't slip her notice that the barrel was pointed right at her gut. *That* was a first. The man had *coonies*. He slammed his cup down hard then rested his large hand lazily just shy of the blaster's grip. He flashed a full set of white teeth, whiter than any miner's that was dead certain.

"You killed my deckhand," he announced, his rich bass undercutting the nightclub's music.

So that's what it's about. She sat back, arms crossed under her chest and scowled at him. He stared back without flinching and they remained this way for some time without a word. Then it hit her. It was his golden eyes. They were soft eyes. Those of a gentle giant, completely devoid of malice.

"Thousand creds a jump," he said.

The Zabrak glared at Amos from across the table, her confusion obvious in her big black eyes. There was a rough beauty behind her feral demeanor, behind the act. Her features were sharp and he didn't just mean the pointed horns of her species crowning her head. It was the high cheekbones, the pointed chin jutting forward defiantly when she ground her teeth. Her facial tattoos were less elaborate than it was common with her people, amounting to mirrored black arcs that ran vertically along each side of her face and crossed over her eyes. She wore black lipstick on her full lips, which accentuated her natural pale skin and sold the idea of the Iridonian Witch. Her blood red hair fell around her horns in a loose wavy mane. He took a deep

breath as he took her in. She looked bigger and far more intimidating in person than she did down in the arena, with her chiseled frame and full figure. He offered her his best smile but it only caused her lips to curl up. As if something had dawned on her, she flashed her teeth in a half-snarl, "What do I look like, flyboy? Ain't no bar floozy, find a *jump* elsewhere."

He laughed. Of course, that's how it sounded. He should have known better. He threw one hand up in defense. "No! *Hutt's shlags* no!" He forced out between laughter. "We're down one deckhand and I reckon since you downed him, you get to replace him. I work on the *Solus*. A thousand creds a jump, that's your pay. The boss'll kill me for offering you Gotagg's salary when we could get a replacement for half, but, blast me, he ain't seen what you could do yet."

She laughed. It was a rough laugh seeping with venom. Then it stopped and she leaned forward, arms still pressed under her bosom, "You're offering me a job, heh?"

"I'll be straight wit'cha, lass. Ain't no easy work we do. Hauling metal ya'll been cuttin' out here, we run into our share of trouble out in the black."

"Aw! Poor little smuggler, all cozy up in his spaceship thinking he knows trouble." Her voice was like a dagger. She shot him a vicious smile. He didn't let that phase him.

"What we do's legit. But there's lots of pirates out there, and don't get me started on the Empire, blasted bucketheads. Then there's the whole bloody Rebellion or Alliance or whatever they call themselves. Thieves I tell ya, the lot of them! Neither side pays half as well as the Hutts or the Toydarians and they don't give you a choice in the matter. Requisition they call it." He stopped abruptly. There he was, launching into another tirade. He'd been going on a whole lot of those lately. *Way to sell the work, laserbrains*. He cleared his throat and finished with, "I reckon you'll never make this much money if you pool what you make down in the mines with what you make out in the pits."

"You'd be surprised," she said, but she seemed to soften up, a glimmer of interest in her dark eyes. "Can I see the ship?"

"Lass, you can get the whole blasted deluxe tour if it gets your gears turning."

She threw the drink back in one loud gulp. She grimaced.

"You'll have to do better with that tour than you did with this cheap hooch!"

The *Solus* was a massive ship. Amos had called it a bulk freighter and Raeleen was beginning to understand what that meant. It was bigger than any building down on 0-1315 and could have likely boxed up half the asteroid's yield in one go. As the giant Human led her through the cargo hold, she realized that this was just one of many stops. She watched as workers loaded a couple dozen mineral crates. *A fleck of dust in a mine*, she thought. There had to be a thousand crates in this place. Overlooking the whole proceedings was a strict-looking, golden-haired woman dressed in a squeaky clean outfit. That had to be the captain and Raeleen wondered why her guide was going through the trouble of sneaking her in. Wouldn't the ship's captain want to meet a potential hire? She jabbed at Amos' side then nodded in the woman's direction.

He grinned as if he'd read her mind, "She sees you before I hire you, you're not getting a deal half as generous."

"What is it you do out here?"

"Second-in-command."

"More like second fiddle," she said, her tone mocking.

He grinned at her, his white teeth shining through his beard. She found herself smiling back at him. There was really no getting a rise out of that overgrown, kind-hearted pirate. As they made their way through the maze of crates she found her eyes were on him more than the ship itself. He was a rough kind of man, but there was something noble about him and she knew that should have caused her to recoil. She was a *mine-rat*, not worth the ten credits she was paid on any given day. She had no delusions of grandeur about her status. She worked hard, played harder and that's about all that she expected from life. It was all any of them down on asteroid 0-1315 had a right to expect. To be offered this opportunity to hire out on the *Solus*, to fly out into the stars and never look back, her mind cartwheeled at the thought of it. A new life. A chance to be her own woman. A chance to pay off her debt to Qorrixor and his Black Sun affiliates. Never had she been dealt a better hand.

Again, she found her eyes had wandered back to the mountainous man.

There was no denying that the *Solus* was a grand ship, and the cargo bay alone proof of how successful a venture it was. The ship itself was a little scummy, sure, but no worse than the tunnels of O-1315, and she reckoned it gave it character. After all, the only squeaky clean ships she'd seen were those so-called Imperial Destroyers in holo-vids. Between those ships and those shiny bucketheads it was a wonder those Imperial types ever managed to get anything done.

They were climbing up a service ladder now. Amos reached the top first and turned around to offer her his hand. Their eyes met and before she realized what she was doing, she'd reached out with her own. He pulled her the rest of the way up. Angry with her impulse, she yanked her hand away like he was liquid fire. He held his hands up in mock defense, amusement glistening in his eyes. That only stoked her ire.

"I don't need your help," she snapped as she elbowed past him and ducked through a hatchdoor into what had to be the ship's mess hall. It was a massive room with five long durasteel tables lined up. There were a couple deckhands chowing down. They were all looking at her, the attention enough to stop her cold in her tracks. Amos came up behind her, draping his big hands over her shoulders like he would his jacket.

"New recruit," he announced like it was a done deal. They turned their attention back to their food without so much as a shrug. It wasn't the warmest of welcome, but she'd had worse. Amos led her past the tables stopping only to greet a Twi'lek lass with a prosthetic arm. "Joni! Good to see you up and about!"

The Twi'lek waved at the big man between two bites of some pasty white sop. The way this Joni blushed when Amos winked was no real surprise. Of course the big man had his admirers. What did surprise Raeleen was how angry and jealous she felt about it. She averted her gaze, tried to look elsewhere as Amos pushed past her and motioned for one of the exits. She found herself hoping it led out of the *Solus* altogether. The whole place was beginning to feel a touch claustrophobic.

The door led to a lift which in turn carried them down to engineering.

As he gave her a tour of the engineering deck, Amos watched her. She was a real puzzle that one. First there'd been the whole Iridonian Witch facade. The tough act. Then she'd been all smiles and interest, listening attentively, going so far as to tease him like he were an old friend. Then he'd offered his hand and somehow that had insulted her honor. Now she looked like a caged animal. Her shoulders clamped in a tight coil, arms crossed, she made her way forward, neck craning this way and that as she gawked at the *Solus'* aging machinery, doing her best to avoid his gaze. He wasn't sure how he was going to convince her to sign on, or that the lifestyle even suited her, seeing how skittish it actually made her. He wondered if perhaps he'd misjudged her. Still, it was up to her to take the plunge. Her skill as a fighter alone would be a boon to the crew. And he had to admit it: he liked her, feral streak and all.

The tour led them up another service ladder, through a hatch back up to the main deck. Next up was the cockpit which was currently empty. Their pilot, Ichto, was off-ship tending to some business or another. It wasn't a big space and that was a problem for Amos. He had to hunch his shoulders and press his back against the wall to let her by. She pushed inside, her hands sliding over his stomach as she did. They felt terribly close all of a sudden, intimately so, and for a split second their gaze met. He was surprised to feel the heat flaring in his cheeks. He cleared his throat and motioned for her to take a seat in the co-pilot's chair then threw himself in the pilot's seat. He grinned at her.

"Ichto would kill me if he knew I was sitting in his chair," he mused.

She moved to speak, her mouth crooked with snark, but held back, letting whatever she meant to say pass her by. Another jab about his weight, probably. She looked out into space beyond the cockpit and the hangar's forcefield. From where they were sitting they could just barely make out the docking bay around them. They might as well have been out in the black. He took a moment to enjoy the view.

"Been flying for twenty-some years now," he said. "I never tire of this view. Ain't nothing more peaceful."

She sat in silence, her eyes riveted on the distant stars. He moved to get up but she motioned for him to wait. "Just a little longer," she whispered. A plea. He sunk back in the seat, kicked his feet up onto the dashboard.

“What are you thinking?” The words sounded naïve as he spoke them. He turned his head sideways to look at her. Perhaps for the first time since he’d met her, the Witch’s mask had fallen off. She seemed almost at peace.

“It’s a good view,” she said. There was the hint of a smile poking at the corners of her black lips.

“Aye,” he agreed without taking his eyes off of her, “It is.”

Perhaps she felt his eyes on him. She stole a glance from the corner of her eyes, her features hardening as she realized that he’d been staring. He looked away, embarrassed. He cleared his throat again, then pushed to his feet.

“So, huh, I reckon we’re just about done. There’s the crew quarters left on the way out,” he said.

The dashboard lights lit up her face as she pushed herself to her feet. Amos could swear he saw a hint of red on her cheeks. Had she been blushing? He pushed the ridiculous notion out of his head and pushed out of the cockpit. They passed Joni as they moved on to the crew quarters. The bubbly teen stepped out of the way, grinning and blushing up at him the entire time. He had to wonder what kind of mischief she’d been up to. The Twi’lek was like a daughter to him and he knew she only got that look when she’d played a prank on one of her crewmates. He gave her a shake of his head then a soft shove with his buttocks on his way past her. She prodded his ribs with her mechanical arm. They chuckled together.

“Go on, back to work,” he said. Turning his attention back to Raeleen, he found the Zabrak staring daggers at the kid. *She’ll need to work on her people skills*, he thought with another chuckle. She noticed and turned the daggers his way.

They reached the crew quarters without further delay. It was nothing fancy, really, a big room lined with bunk beds and personal lockers. There was a rest area replete with a holofeed projector, some couches and even a Dejarik table. Someone had been playing a game and left it running while they went about their business, the little holographic monsters patiently waiting for their return.

“So, yeah, this is the crew quarters. I know, I know. Nothing fancy. But it does the job. Never hear any complaints. Well, that’s a lie. *Some complaints.*” He laughed as a thought popped in his mind. “I reckon some will think you did them a service offing Gotagg. He snored like a runned-down podracer.”

“Everyone sleeps here?” she asked.

“Well, everyone but the captain and I. We get our own separate quarters back here,” he guided her past the bunk beds towards the two doors on the far wall. He stepped over to the right one, rapped his fingers on the control panel and the door swished open. He stepped inside. “Home, sweet home.”

Besides a door, which he had to admit was a pretty nice boon in and of itself, there wasn't all that much to differentiate his bunk from the communal quarters, unless you counted the dingy nightstand beside his cot. The dozens of empty booze bottles left him more than a little ashamed. He tried to ignore them.

When he turned to her, he found her dark eyes locked squarely on his. She had a look about her that reminded him of a Nexu stalking its prey. It confused him. He wanted to take a step back, but his legs felt wobbly. For fear of tipping over, he stayed still. He just stared back at her, remotely conscious that his mouth was hanging. His lips suddenly felt terribly dry. She took a step forward, then another. His eyes followed her, moving to the rhythm of her swaying hips. He realised that he was holding his breath. He tried to exhale, but he couldn't quite remember how. She drew closer and closer, a voracious smile hanging on her black lips. She tapped a single, long finger on the control panel and the door closed behind her. Her body pressed against his. Her lips fused with his. His hands finding their way to the small of her back. She nipped at his lip as she pulled her head back, her dark eyes clouding his vision.

“How about that *jump*?” she asked.

Raeleen could not recall a time when she had been more at peace than at that precise moment, cradled in this giant's arms. She lay there, her naked form pressed up against his, listening to the rumble of air filling up his lungs as he slept. There was something about him that made him different from the others, that made him worth holding onto. She rolled over to get a better look at him. The greasy mane, the beard, those gentle eyes, they called to her. It was easy to forget who she was and where she came from around him. It would have been that much easier to lose herself in this great big cocoon. Her hand found its way to his cheek. Even as she sighed in blissful abandon, her heart ached. It ached because this stranger was the

best thing that had happened to her and it ached because she knew that she could not go with him.

She slipped from underneath his arm. He stirred and mumbled something incoherent. For a moment, she feared she had woken him but he never came to. She slipped into her clothes then sat on the edge of his bed, her hand snaking around his, trembling. She didn't want to go. Part of her screamed, begging her not to go, warning her that she was making a mistake. She almost gave in. She wanted to believe her inner voice. Now that she'd found his touch, she couldn't bear to be without it.

That was why she had to go.

She wanted to sign on with the *Solus*. She had dreamed of such an opportunity for so long. She longed to see new worlds, to get away from this frozen rock. She longed to be her own woman. But she knew that if she went with him, she would be *his* woman. How long would it be before he realized how worthless she truly was? How long before she was cast aside? Her chest heaved. A whimper escaped her throat and she realized that she was crying. She wiped at the tears, squeezed his hand and left him.

The walk back from the docking bay to the barracks never seemed so long.

Amos strapped in the last of the shipment then backed away, dusting his hands. He checked the straps once, twice, three times, but the truth was his heart just wasn't into it. He'd woken up alone, and, though he couldn't say it surprised him, he had to admit he'd hoped for more. He'd gone looking for a deckhand but he'd found something else entirely. The Iridonian Witch was a fitting name. She'd cast a spell on him. And now, she danced on his mind, taunting him with a sway of her hips. When he closed his eyes, all he could see were her dark eyes beckoning him. He leaned back and rested his head against one of the crates, then puffed his cheek and blew out his frustration. It wasn't the first portside fling he'd had, far from it. Why was this bothering him? Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe she would still join him.

"Amos, we're just about ready," the captain shouted from across the cargo bay.

“All clear here, boss!” He wanted to tell her to wait, to hold on a moment longer, but he didn’t have that kind of courage.

“Alright, closing the ramp.”

A flashing red light warned him to stand clear of the loading platform. There was a hiss and the hydraulics spat vapor. A moment longer and the ramp closed with a resounding thump.

“Hey, Amos! Where’s that new recruit?” the captain wondered.

“She isn’t coming.”

“And about a year later, I was born!”

Bale Andros set his empty glass down as he finished retelling the story of how his mother and father met. He reckoned it was no story to tell a kid, but then his daughter knew how to get what she wanted. She was a lot like her grand-mother in that way, headstrong and cocksure. The girl sat cross-legged on her bed staring up at him with her big golden eyes wide with wonder. Her mouth was curled up in one of her goofy grins that meant she only half-believed him.

“Just like that? He poofed!”

“Well, when a woman tells a man he needs to go, he needs to go. And if it was your grandma doing the telling, you better bet he was running!” Bale poked her in the tummy and she laughed, but then her shoulders hunched.

“That’s kinda sad!”

Bale knelt by her bed and ruffled her brown hair. “Well, ma never seemed to think so. She was the toughest person I ever knew and she didn’t need a big burly man around getting in her way.”

“I’m tough too!”

“Sure you are, Loth-cat, but you’re stuck with this big burly man!” He winked as he guided her head down toward her pillow, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. She giggled. He planted a kiss on her forehead, switched her light panel into night mode and pushed himself up, taking care not to bang his head on the ceiling. He looked over his shoulder. “Sleep tight.”

Before he made it out of their shared quarters the sound of shuffled blankets told him she'd sat back up again. He rolled his eyes as he turned, ready to deliver a sermon about the benefits of sleep but, the way she furrowed her brow, he could tell she was concerned. She asked, "Did grandma ever see Amos again?"

The question was like a punch to the gut. He kept his composure as he answered, "You betcha."

"I'm glad," was the girl's last words before she settled in for the night.

Bale made his way back to the cockpit, pensive, memories of his mother playing on repeat in his mind. She'd done her best to raise him back on O-1315, showed him to be a hard worker but she'd always had a wild streak about her. By the time he'd been eleven or twelve and capable of taking care of himself, she'd disappeared offworld, gone to who knows where. Over the next decade or so, she'd show up now and again to check in on her boy, or so she said. She'd joke that she needed to catch some shuteye from time to time. Truth was, she'd become tangled with the Black Sun.

Bale had told his daughter the truth when he said that Raeleen saw Amos again. The part he'd left out, and that's the part you didn't go telling a kid, was that by that point, Amos Farstrider had become some big shot spice trader, an influential fellow with a whole lot of credits, and with influence came a whole lot of enemies too. Under orders from the Black Sun, she'd been the one sent to put a blaster bolt in his brainpan. So much for a romantic reunion.

Life sure had a cruel kind of irony to it.

He let out a long, drawn-out sigh as he sunk down in the pilot's chair. Then he slipped the blaster from the holster on his thigh and turned it this way and that in the light of the cockpit. His father's Briar pistol was a big, bulky thing. It packed a hell of a punch too. Amos had it when he met Raeleen, and, technically, it was still his when she shot him with it. Then Raeleen had turned it against the Black Sun but that little crusade would only reap a world of trouble for her and Bale and now poor little Kaela asleep in her bunk. It's why he'd given Kaela her mother's surname, Val.

She deserved better.

Andros folks had a knack for making bad choices.