

“Rocks and Hard Places”

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Lieutenant Volshaka cursed as the hard hit from the TIE Interceptor impacted her A-wing. Everything seemed to happen at once: her fighter bucked, an engine died, sparks flew, cockpit panels dimmed, power bled out. Following right on the heels of that instant, smoke began filling the cockpit, obscuring her vision and making her cough.

She fought to steer her wounded A-wing clear of the dogfight, but even that simple task was nearly impossible; her traitorous fighter resisted her commands and decided to only obey gravity from the planet below. Her ego and pride resisted as long as they possibly could and then some, but by the middle of the third emergency checklist that failed to improve her situation even the slightest bit, she had to finally admit it to herself.

She was going to crash.

Volshaka gritted her teeth and threw a few more curses at the Imperial that had just completely and totally ruined her day. This was *not* what she wanted to be doing.

The small planet below them was a barren, lifeless, dark grey rock pockmarked with a few craters and what looked like some slopes from erosion. She wasn't sure how sustainable it was for her brand of life, especially with how close to the system's star it was, but she didn't have any other options. Gravity was taking her there whether she liked it or not.

Through sheer force of will she aimed the dying fighter on the best glide path to the surface, and then she coughed, keyed her comm, and punched through the chaotic transmissions from the rest of her flight still engaged in the dogfight.

“Mayday, mayday. This is Seven. Critical damage. I'm going down. I'll have to eject once I'm close enough to the surface.”

“Seven, are you okay? I'm sorry, I tried to get that squint but I couldn't in time!” The anxious words came from Volshaka's wingman, Flight Officer Terekke. The Mon Calamari was a worrywart by nature, and this was just going to send her into overdrive. Volshaka was sorry for putting her through this, especially since Terekke would probably be more upset by this blasted inconvenience than Volshaka was.

“I'm fine, Eight. There was nothing you could do: he just got me. Just send some help when you get back to the ship. Look for my beacon. I'll be okay.”

“Are you sure?” Terekke didn't sound convinced. “That planet doesn't look very hospitable. What if it's not habitable?”

“Then you'd better send help before my life support unit is depleted,” Volshaka replied. “I'll be fine, Eight. Now I need to go. The planet coming up to smack me is requiring my attention.”

Volshaka ended her transmission and concentrated on her contingency operations, trying to figure out the best altitude to eject.

She muttered another curse under her breath. This was really, *really* not what she wanted to be dealing with today.

Few beings ever bothered to visit the world. Even fewer knew the world was inhabited. If they had known that and seen the inhabitants, they would have posited some theories about genetic relations to Sullustan Rockrenders. On the surface they could be forgiven for the automatic assumption, but the fact would remain that they were wrong.

The inhabitants had no collective name for themselves, as they had never needed to differentiate between themselves and anything else. They simply were. What wasn't them was not them.

Regardless, if more of the other beings had taken the time to visit the world with the not-related-to-Rockrender inhabitants, they would have been able to enjoy the nice night like Nnnzzz was. It had been a very active night for Nnnzzz, and soon it would be time to go dormant for the day. But before that happened, Nnnzzz had wanted to go cool off on the surface.

That was when Nnnzzz had seen the painfully bright lights flashing up by the stars.

Curiosity forced Nnnzzz's sensitive visual receptors to watch them. Nnnzzz had heard stories of such things from the others, of occasional rocks that fell to the world from the sky but weren't rain, though Nnnzzz could never figure out how those rocks got so high into the sky in the first place. Sometimes a large metallic rock would fall to the surface and numerous things from inside it would come out and move around on the ground before going back in, and then the large rock would fly away again. Nnnzzz couldn't even believe that story— it was too ludicrous. What being could survive its organs mobilizing and leaving it? And how could such a large rock fly upward? It was always very *convenient* that these particular large rocks happened to “fly away” again so Nnnzzz and the others couldn't go see it and verify such a thing was even possible.

But now, Nnnzzz wondered what the bright flashing lights were and if they would cause non-rain rocks to fall from the sky, and so Nnnzzz watched in wonder.

Eventually a particularly bright flash caught Nnnzzz's attention. The glowing object grew larger and larger. Nnnzzz was thrilled to see it was a large rock, and it looked like lava was trailing behind it as it fell. It even seemed like it would land not terribly far away.

Just as Nnnzzz was about to head toward the expected landing location, the falling rock flashed again. Puzzled, Nnnzzz watched as something separated from the falling rock and flew away from it. Was this another rock, or was this one of the rock's organs? It was going to land a lot closer to Nnnzzz, so Nnnzzz decided to go there first.

Nnnzzz ducked into the subsurface tunnels and moved quickly in that direction.

When Nnnzzz emerged back onto the surface near the smaller item's suspected landing site, Nnnzzz was pleased to see the chosen tunnel exit was indeed close. Nnnzzz stood still and watched with interest. The thing had landed, and its lack of a hard rock-like carapace meant it must be the large falling rock's organ. That whole ludicrous story seemed to be true. It momentarily shook Nnnzzz's world. If that impossible, nonsensical thing was true, then what else was?

Unlike Nnnzzz, the organ did not blend in with the surface's grey landscape. Strangely, it actually was mobile. It stood on two legs versus the four that Nnnzzz had, and it kicked the ground a few times. It must be hungry, since it was feeding like Nnnzzz did. Maybe the mobile organs were how the large rocks ate. It was an odd thought. But how could the organ eat when it lacked the large claws all the inhabitants had? Breaking rocks and absorbing minerals would be

impossible without them, but somehow the mobile organ was doing it. That was fascinating and even a little scary, especially with the size discrepancy. Nnnzzz's back only came up to the mobile organ's midsection. Was it dangerous? Nnnzzz felt a little better upon realizing that the mobile organ did not have a spiked club tail like Nnnzzz, so there was some defense there, but again, how could the organ crush rocks without a tail either?

Nnnzzz was pondering that and weighing the dangers of this mobile organ when the first sensations arrived. Nnnzzz looked at the sky, and indeed, it was lightening. Day would be here soon, along with the molten rock rain that heralded the dawn and the thin atmosphere's drastically changing temperature from cold to incredibly hot as the sun rose. Even now Nnnzzz could feel the distant pings of the rock rain hitting the surface, and it would only get closer as dawn rapidly approached. It was time to go dormant in shelter for the day.

Nnnzzz looked back at the mobile organ. It had stopped feeding but was otherwise not acting like there was danger approaching. Then it raised an upper appendage and made light spill out of it, and this strange power startled Nnnzzz. The small beam of light swept over the ground where the organ stood.

Nnnzzz wasn't sure what other abilities this organ had or if it would try to feed on Nnnzzz's own mineral carapace, but a larger part of Nnnzzz was still curious about this freakishly odd thing, and Nnnzzz didn't want to see it destroyed in the dawn rain. Nnnzzz briefly considered if it would be smarter to go to the large fallen rock and try to save it first, but there wasn't enough time to get to the large rock's landing site before the dawn rain came. Nnnzzz had felt the distant yet significant impact from the large rock while Nnnzzz had been moving through the subsurface tunnels to get here, and Nnnzzz wasn't sure if the large rock was still alive. But without its organ, it might not survive and be able to fly away anyway.

The decision was made. Nnnzzz would try to help this peculiar mobile organ now. Once it was safe to go to the surface again, Nnnzzz could try to find the large rock and offer assistance.

Warily, Nnnzzz began walking toward the mobile organ. Its head—the organ had a head?—turned toward Nnnzzz, and then the organ jumped back. Its light shone directly on Nnnzzz, and Nnnzzz stopped and shied away from the pain. Quickly the light lowered and stopped overloading Nnnzzz's visual receptors.

When Nnnzzz could see again, Nnnzzz looked back at the organ. It backed up another step, and its other upper appendage detached a piece of its body and held it between itself and Nnnzzz. Nnnzzz waited, puzzled. Was this organ actually *afraid* of Nnnzzz? That didn't make sense, but Nnnzzz couldn't wonder about it now. Nnnzzz wasn't sure how intelligent a mobile organ was, so it would be best to keep things very basic. Nnnzzz rumbled the low frequency through the ground that imparted the messages of "*Dawn rain coming. Go down.*"

The mobile organ seemed to feel it, since it jumped again and looked at the ground, but otherwise it didn't move. Nnnzzz repeated the message, but still the organ stayed put.

There was no time for this; Nnnzzz could feel the impacts from the molten rock rain getting closer. Nnnzzz gave the mobile organ a respectable berth but circled around it to its opposite side, then walked slowly towards it to herd it to the tunnel opening Nnnzzz had used. At first it worked: the organ moved away from Nnnzzz and toward the tunnel. But then the organ scooted to the side in a different direction. It was too nimble for Nnnzzz to keep up with.

That meant Nnnzzz would have to make it understand somehow.

"*Stop,*" Nnnzzz sent through the ground as Nnnzzz stopped as well. Once Nnnzzz stopped, so did the organ. Nnnzzz's head jerked in the direction of the coming dawn, and the next strong message sent was "*Danger.*"

The organ stared at Nnnzzz for a moment, then it looked in the direction Nnnzzz had indicated. Nnnzzz could see the glow on the horizon now as the dawn rain approached. Even the temperature was starting to shift higher, and dust particles swirled in the increasing wind.

The mobile organ stared at the horizon glow for a few moments, and then it lowered the detached piece of its body it had been holding out. It looked back at Nnnzzz.

Pleased to have the organ's attention, Nnnzzz sent the message "*Down.*" Nnnzzz's head now jerked toward the tunnel entrance. The tunnel's opening was in the side of a small crater wall, leeward to the predominant blowing winds of dawn, and the tunnel disappeared below the surface.

The organ looked that direction as well with its light, then back at the ever-closer horizon glow, then at Nnnzzz. Nnnzzz could feel the strong heat from the sun quickly approaching. If the mobile organ didn't cooperate soon, Nnnzzz would be forced to leave it behind.

Thankfully, the organ took one single, hesitant step toward the tunnel while watching Nnnzzz closely. Nnnzzz took a single step as well. The organ took another. Nnnzzz took another. At last the organ seemed to understand, and it cautiously walked toward the tunnel entrance. Nnnzzz did the same while staying far enough away to not frighten it.

By the time the organ made it to the tunnel entrance, the heat was getting intense. The horizon glow coalesced into a large wavefront of raining, molten rocks. Each one hit the ground with a dull impact. The sun's light began to blind Nnnzzz as it rose over the horizon behind the wavefront. Come nighttime, Nnnzzz would gather some of those freshly-hardened rocks for mineral-rich food, but right now they were more of a danger than a salvation.

The organ seemed to sense the growing urgency. It lowered itself to the ground on its bent appendages and quickly crawled into the tunnel. Nnnzzz was right behind it. With every step, the dark tunnel grew cooler and cooler until it neutralized the heat of the inferno on the surface.

The organ's light beam played over the walls. As they moved through the warren of interconnecting subsurface tunnels, Nnnzzz would occasionally nudge the organ to make a certain turn. The organ obeyed, though somewhat slowly.

Before too long, they reached a dormancy chamber. It was wider and more open than the tunnels, and the organ straightened to almost its original height inside. Nnnzzz sent a quick message to tell the organ to stop, and Nnnzzz halted. The organ did as well. Nnnzzz tapped one foot on the ground, then laid down to relax. A short time later, the organ lowered itself to the ground as well on the opposite side of the chamber, though it kept its light out and watched Nnnzzz carefully.

Nnnzzz wasn't quite sure what to do now. Would the organ leave the dormancy chamber and wander through the tunnels? What if it got lost or ran into one of the others who weren't expecting this odd monstrosity to suddenly come face-to-face with them in their home? Nnnzzz should warn them. Plus, there were some others who were as curious about the large falling rock stories as Nnnzzz was and would want to take this rare opportunity to see an actual mobile organ. Nnnzzz sent a brief message to the others and warned them to not scare the organ by moving too fast if they came.

Soon there was a crowd at the entrance to the dormancy chamber, with numerous others trying to see the organ inside and asking question after excited question. The organ got to its feet and backed up, so Nnnzzz also rose and stood between the organ and the others in the entranceway. One message told the others to calm down, and another message tried to reassure the organ that it would not be harmed. With the crowd settling and Nnnzzz still interposed

between the groups, the organ seemed to relax slightly. From the crowd, Nnnzzz allowed Rrrnnn and Mzrrnn to enter the chamber since those two were always trustworthy and were as fascinated as Nnnzzz with the stories.

Nnnzzz told them all about what had happened on the surface and the encounter with the organ. The excited discussion that followed lasted for some time until dormancy overtook them one by one.

A gentle shaking on Nnnzzz's carapace pulled Nnnzzz from dormancy. Nnnzzz looked up to see the mobile organ there. The end of one appendage still created light, and Nnnzzz noticed that another small part of the appendage was blinking with other lights. The organ looked at Nnnzzz, and with the other upper appendage it indicated upward, toward the surface. Nnnzzz considered. It was still a bit early, but the dusk rain should have passed by now and night should have fallen. It should be safe if the organ wanted to go back to the surface.

Nnnzzz stood, wound around the others who were lying dormant there after their long discussion, and led the way through the tunnels. The organ followed.

When they emerged onto the surface in the early night, Nnnzzz was surprised to find a huge metallic rock sitting nearby. It definitely hadn't been there when they'd left the surface at dawn. The organ straightened up and moved quickly toward the gigantic rock. Nnnzzz watched in shock as numerous other organs spilled out of the huge rock and converged on the first organ.

They stood together for a short time, and then the first organ turned and walked back to Nnnzzz. It bent down in a crouch in front of Nnnzzz and looked Nnnzzz in the visual receptors. The organ's mouth— was that small hole on its face a mouth?— moved, but Nnnzzz couldn't detect any messages. Then, oddly, the organ detached a piece of its body from its midsection, and it pulled a small metallic piece from that. It placed the shiny metallic piece on the ground in front of Nnnzzz, and then the organ straightened up and quickly walked back to the other organs.

The group of organs went back inside the gigantic rock, and to Nnnzzz's utter amazement, the gigantic rock jumped off the ground and flew away into the sky toward the stars.

Nnnzzz watched it go. It went higher and higher, higher than the heights any dawn rain fell from, until at last it was so high it was almost indistinguishable from the stars. Then there was a small flash and it disappeared.

At last Nnnzzz looked back to the shiny piece of metal on the ground and tried to puzzle out why the organ would have left something so delicious-smelling behind. Part of Nnnzzz wanted to eat it right then and there, but another part hesitated. The metal was the only thing left of the mobile organ that had left on the huge flying rock. It was a reminder that Nnnzzz had witnessed the impossible.

Nnnzzz carefully picked it up between two large claws and descended back into the tunnels. It was time to put this in Nnnzzz's regular dormancy chamber for safe keeping.

The End

Revision A
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