

Hadors Promise

A Warpath short story

By

Jonathan Peace

*And the Forge Fathers may chide,
But let them scream and cry,
And if the Zz'orr decide to fight us,
they will bleed and die.*

*For we are
One people,
One Nation,
One Leader!*

Skye did her best to ignore the amplified vox-cast but it was impossible. It was streaming everywhere, coming from every speaker along the concourse. Even the temples outer speaker had been compromised. Instead of the usual daily outpouring of universal peace there came the mechanical voice of the High Marshall. It had been going on for three days now, repeated every fifteen minutes. It was slowly driving the young girl insane.

A woman stood on the pavement staring intently at the image on the screen. Her eyes were focused, unblinking. She slowly mouthed the words along with the vox-cast, silently quoting the statement. As Skye watched, another came and joined her. Unconsciously they linked hands and continued to chant. That's what it was, a chant. She could hear it rising all around her as more and more took up the words.

She passed a snax-stand, one of those that used to sell a bit of everything. Now it only sold what *they* said they could sell. Gone were the Flaxian steak-sticks, the Riggly-worm gumbars and the Dew drinks; they were as extinct as the planets from which they originated, incorporated into the great expanse of the Great Galactic Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Well, let them try and incorporate me, she thought, shifting the pistol tucked into her waistband. A quick check of her chrono told her she had ten minutes till the meeting. Off-world passage wasn't cheap, which was why she'd brought the gun. Carrying so many credits would get her locked up in a heartbeat.

A team of Corporation Marines came round the corner of the block, their rifles held across tac-vests, ready and alert. That was the last thing she needed now. Skye saw them, hesitated then turned to go back the way she'd come, walking right into the oncoming path of a group of miners. She hit the first one, knocking the can of synth from his hand. It hit the ground, foaming everywhere.

His one eye turned violent. Where the other should have been, only a deep ragged hole remained. "You dropped my beer, bitch!" he growled. His large paw of a hand clenched and Skye could hear the bones crack.

She looked back. The Marines were a distance away yet, taking an interest in a group of Marauders clustered around the snax-stand. One of the Marines was talking into the mouth-comm attached to his black tac-helmet.

"I'm sorry," she said fumbling in her pocket for some coins. "Let me buy you another."

"Don't want another. I wanted that one."

"Get her to pay you in kind," one of the others said. He threw his own can on the floor.

"Then me." His face spread in an ugly leer.

"Please," Skye said, "take the money." She looked back. The Marauders were moving away.

One-Eye saw her concern and his grin spread wider.

“Or maybe we should get the Black-heads to take her in. Hey! HEY!”

One of the Marines pointed and the Team started walking towards them. Skye tried to run but One-Eye grabbed her. “You ain't going anywhere, love,” he hissed.

Damn it!

Skye dropped to her knees, the sudden movement throwing the larger man off balance. He fell forward, stumbling over Skye's back. She pushed and he flew into his friends. They all crashed to the ground. One of them grabbed her leg when she tried to slip past, his thick dirty fingers clamping about her ankle like a vice.

Her boot stamped down. Bones crunched and he howled, but still clung on, allowing One-Eye time to stagger to his feet. The brute of a miner swung a meaty punch. It rocked Skye back, bloodying her lip but she didn't fall. Instead she lashed out with a speedy kick. Her foot connected solidly right between his legs. His scream of pain was a high reedy note.

Another kick to the face and the one holding her let go. Now she could run.

“Hey you! Halt!”

The Marines were running towards her now, more coming from the other direction, their rifles lowered to firing position. Skye reached beneath her tunic, fingers closing around the butt of her pistol. *Two quick shots. Take out the leader. Run.*

She was pulling the weapon out when a hand closed around her shoulder.

A man in a long browncoat stared at her with blue eyes that were as hard as the plascrete on which they stood. “Don't.”

The Marines surrounded them, rifles pointing at them. Locked and cocked. The Leader walked right up to Skye. “Ident,” he ordered, jabbing her in the chest with an armoured finger. Cold fear gripped her once more. If she handed over her ident it was all over.

The man in the browncoat saved her once again.

“She's my sister,” he said in a slick voice, passing over his own card. “These men are drunk and disorderly. Not me and certainly not my sister.”

The Marine slid the card into the reader on his arm and waited.

Browncoat gave a disarming smile. “Good day for the Declaration,” he said. “Nice weather.”

The troopers just stared at him. Groans came from the men on the floor.

“Bit of a fighter, your sister,” the Marine said. A beep from the reader. His eyes narrowed. Skye stiffened, tensed, ready to run again. Browncoat closed a hand around her waist and gripped tight.

“Try living with her.”

The Team leader took the card and handed it back. He gave a nod. The group of men were dragged to their feet, stun cuffs placed around their wrists. Without another word, the Marines marched their captives away.

Skye let out a long sigh. “Thank you,” she said. “I don't know how I can repay you.”

Browncoat smiled. “I do. You can buy me a drink.”

*Their rotten bones are trembling,
Damn their hatred and their War.
We have smashed their planetwide terror,
and sown the seeds of peace once more
Brought you victory and calm
and lay waste all who oppose transition into one rule.*

Even in the bar the broadcast still continued, not that any of the patrons were really listening to it. They were huddled over their drinks, crammed into the booths along the wall or stood leaning on the central bar, its oval hub allowing the bartender to see everything that happened. A low murmur of voices hung beneath the repeating broadcast, occasionally broken by a gruff shout or the very

rare bark of laughter. The Marauders Skye had seen earlier were clustered in the far shadows, grunting in their own language and punching each other to make a point. In another corner a lone Forge Father waved an empty tankard in the air, his beard sopping wet. On the table before him was a helmet of such technological design, Skye figured him to be one of the Huscarl.

“Yorvic Firehelm,” Browncoat said, seeing the girls interest.

“What's wrong with him?” she asked as the Forge Father slammed his tankard on the table and began to sing a low dirge. She couldn't make out the words from this distance but judging by the look on his face, it wasn't anything good.

“Once part of the Trading Fleet Iron Rock, he lost his Ward Ship.”

“Lost? Was it the Corporation?” she asked, lowering her voice. Who knew what ears were listening, even in a place such as this.

“No. He *lost* it. Went out on an exploratory mission, came back and it was just gone. Lost. I'll take a Green Zinth.”

“What?”

Browncoat pointed first to the foul looking bartender, then over to a shadowed booth in the recess of the bar. “I'll be over there.”

Skye nodded. As she waited for the bartender to get their drinks she turned her attention to the vid-panel above the bar. A man dressed in the high necked grey coat of a Corporation High Marshall stood behind a podium thronged with microphones. Beside him stood another man, this one pale skinned and thin. His face was locked in a frozen grimace, a smile that never quite reached his eyes.

“... time for Damark IV. We welcome you into the family of the Prosperity Sphere under whose dome you will experience wealth and growth of a scale never imagined on this world before.”

“Load of Zz'orr spit if you tell me,” the man beside Skye shouted. “Ain't nothing but slave labour on a global scale and Skellios is just letting 'em in.” he turned his bleary eyes to Skye. A nudge of his elbow nearly sent her spinning to the floor.

“What say you girlie?”

“Just want to buy my drinks,” she said, turning her attention back to the bartender. “How much?”

“Thirty seven,” he said.

Skye's mouth dropped. “Thirty seven? I could buy my own bar for that.”

“Yeah, well, go ahead then.” He reached to pull the glasses back. Skye pulled her money card from her pocket.

“No need to do that. I'll pay.”

The card reader was passed over. She slid it in, pressed her thumb to the reader and paid the extortionate amount. Before she slid the card back out, the man beside her leered over her shoulder.

“You gotts a lot of credits there, girlie. Buy me a drink.”

“Get lost creep.”

His hand felt like rock when it grabbed her shoulder to spin her around. “I said... buy me a drink.”

The punch was hard, flat and powerful. It caught the man in a rising uppercut, rocking his head back, giving Skye time to sidestep and drive a sweeping kick behind his legs while at the same time pushing him to the ground. He hit the floor hard, his head cracking the tiles with a resounding thud. It sounded like wet meat being punched.

She backed up, alert for the next attack she was sure was coming. An instant circle of space had appeared around Skye's section of the bar but that was the extent of the interest being shown. The bartender leaned over the bar and stared at the groaning man on the ground.

“Don't be sleeping on my floor, or I'll have the Black-heads come take you.” He looked up at Skye. “Bout time someone put him in his place. Never thought it'd be a little scrunt like you.”

She grabbed her drinks. “I can take care of myself.” Skye stepped over the prone man. The bartender watched her go.

"That you can, little missy," he said. "That you can."

Browncoat was sat in the booth, leaning against the rippled contour of the vac-formed wall when she came over. She put the drink before him and flopped into a seat opposite.

"You took your sweet time. Good job I ain't dying of thirst here," he said. "What was the ker-scuffle about? We don't like no ker-scuffling going on. Draws attention."

"I handled it."

"That I could see, but it wasn't my question. Little girls shouldn't be playing with big men. Liable to get hurt."

"I can take care of myself."

"That you can, but trouble seems to have a mighty fine way of following you around. Might want to be thinking on the reason why." He took a sip of his drink. When Skye didn't follow, he gave a quick nod towards her own glass.

Skye grimaced at the taste of the drink. Browncoat smiled and downed the rest of his in one fast shot. A moment passed. He smiled. His cheeks began to redden and a keen sweat broke out on his forehead. A second later and he was coughing fit to burst.

"And maybe big men out not to underestimate me," she said. In a smooth motion she tossed the shot back, slamming the glass back onto the table.

Browncoat let out a whoop and slapped his leg. "I knew there was something about you I liked. Garçon!" he called. "Another round here."

A Marauder server came over with the bottle of synth and poured. The bottle was tiny in its meaty green fingers. "Garçon means human boy in your," it growled in stilted broken All-speak.

"Well, you ain't either," Browncoat purred. "And leave the bottle. I think we have a bit of celebrating to do."

"Why?" Skye asked.

Browncoat raised his glass. "Cos you just found yourself a pilot."

Skye's eyes widened. "You're Grimm?"

"I'm a little grumpy," Browncoat said, "but I'm not Grimm. He's Grimm."

Skye turned. Walking towards them was the man she'd knocked out. He rubbed at the back of his head. "You didn't tell me she was a fighter."

He dropped into the booth beside Skye, took the bottle and drank deep.

Over the course of the next hour and three bottles, Skye listened as Grimm and the man in the long brown coat told them all about *Hadors Promise* and the joys of living on a starship.

"Ain't about the best thing in the world when we dust off from one place and head on to the next," Grimm said. "Can't beat that feeling of wandering through the stars, no ties anywhere."

"Don't you ever get tired and want to just settle down?" Skye asked.

"Tried that once. Corporation won't let us. You told her how the *Promise* got her name yet?" Grimm asked. Browncoat shook his head.

"Didn't see any cause to."

"I thought the name was familiar. You lived on Hador, didn't you?"

Grimm let out a meaty laugh. "Lived on it? Why we --"

"We'd rather not be talking about that," Browncoat said with a jagged look thrown Grimm's way. "What happened on Hador was a tragedy to be sure. Ain't no good luck gonna come from bringing up that ghost."

Skye leaned back. "We got told the tale of Hador every night when I was growing up. How a bunch of rebels fought against the Corporation's Prosperity programme until it became an all out war."

"A war that saw a lot of good folks killed when none needed to. I saw --"

"Erm, boss?"

"-- lots of blood and death all in the name of the Corporation's so called Prosperity programme, just like they're starting to do here. Ain't nothing prosperous as I can see in claiming a man's hard work for their own and rewarding him with just enough food to get by each day."

"Boss, you might want to see this."

Grimm nodded towards the entrance. A team of Corporation Marines stalked inside. The bartender pointed towards their booth. Customers hastily got out of the troopers way as they marched across towards them, their boots thundering across the tiles.

“Damn,” Skye whispered.

“You armed?” Browncoat muttered to Grimm.

“You said no weapons.”

“You've no... since when did you ever listen to anything I ever said. Seriously... no weapons?”

Before Grimm could reply, the Troopers were at their side. The leader, his face partially hidden by his helmet visor slung his rifle over his shoulder and took out a data-pad. He looked at it for a moment, then at their group.

“So, look who we have here,” the Leader said.

Skye stood up, hand behind her back. “I don't want --”

“I don't care what you want. Sit down.” He looked across at Browncoat. “Now why would the great Rebel leader of the Hador uprising be here on Damark IV I ask myself?”

Skye turned wide eyes towards Browncoat. “You're Nate Coulson?”

The Corporation trooper began to smirk. “You really should choose your companions better, little girl.” He turned his visored stare back to Coulson. “On your feet, scum. The High Marshall can make a good example out of you to the local populace in his speech.”

He reached down to grab Coulson but before he could, Grimm leapt up, slamming the bottle over the Leaders head. Synth and shards of glass exploded, knocking the trooper onto the table. He hit hard, but not hard enough for Grimm. He grabbed the straps of the tac-vest, lifted the man up and slammed him back down again, this time cracking the table.

Coulson, meanwhile had jumped up and across all four members of the team, sending them all crashing to the floor. On his feet in seconds, he kicked one in the face before grabbing at their fallen rifles. He threw one to Grimm, keeping another for himself.

People scattered. This was no bar room brawl. Another team of troopers were pushing their way through the crowd of fleeing customers. Hindered by the surge, they struggled to get inside. One of them saw Grimm standing over the prone body of a trooper. He raised his rifle and fired quick shots into the air. Chunks of plascrete showered around them, but the crowd scattered giving the troopers clear access.

“Hey... no shooting up my bar!” The bartender pulled a shotgun from beneath the counter. A blast from a trooper vaporised his head.

“That's what you get for sliding into bed with these bastards,” Coulson growled. He dropped to his knee and fired. Ice blue bolts of energy criss-crossed the bar, forcing the troopers to duck back for cover. All around them holes exploded in walls and pillars leaving smoking craters.

Grimm grabbed Skye and threw her to the rear exit. “Go,” he shouted. A trooper groaned and started to rise. A quick sharp punch with the butt of Grimm's rifle and the man collapsed once more.

Energy blasts scorched the air as a squad of Marauders barged their way inside. They didn't care, they shot at anything and everything. The bar disintegrated under their deadly fusilage; glasses fragmented spectacularly, the counter top became a smoking ruin in moments, while the vid-screen simply vanished in bright light and sparks.

“Too many,” Coulson shouted above the din. He whirled and dropped a Marauder with a clean shot to the chest. The large brute fell to the floor, taking a Corporation troop out with a reflex shot. “Not so many,” Coulson laughed.

Grimm kicked the door open and ran outside. Standing there was a full platoon of Troopers, weapons at the ready. Two of them were fastening the legs of a multi-barrelled laser weapon in place while behind them a *Warrior* class APC hovered into place. Its back doors zipped open and another Section of Marauder Grunts dropped out.

The weapons team saw Grimm standing in the doorway of the bar and swung towards him. Hundreds of tiny bolts blasted in and around the wall in a deadly thunderfire of noise and smoke.

Grimm fell inside, landing on his back, his feet kicking the door shut. Skye looked down at him.

"We can't get out that way," he said just as the door exploded into fragments. Coulson came running up to them, firing back the way he came from the hip.

"What you laying down there for?"

"They have a 'mower'," Grimm said. Skye helped him to his feet.

"Then we'll have to make our own exit."

Coulson pulled a square device from within his coat. He spun round and threw it with a beastial cry. It soared over the heads of the Marauders who watched its passing with a dumb fascination. It struck the wall where it stuck with a dull clang.

"What's that?" Skye asked.

"Magnetic clamp I took from one of those troopers. Might want to duck."

The explosion was loud. Debris and bits of Marauder spattered down around them. Smoke blew everywhere. Coulson hefted his weapon and took off towards the gapng hole in the bars wall. Grimm let off a volley of shots that kept the Corporation troopers pinned down long enough for them to make their escape. With Skye running between them, the three jumped through the wall and disappeared from sight.

*We will continue to march,
Even if everything shatters;
Because today Damark IV hears us,
And tomorrow, the whole Jinkaru Sector.
Corporation Victory is your prospe---*

The vid-screen exploded in a shower of sparks and plastic. Grimm lowered his rifle.

"That damn High Marshall is really getting on my tits," he said.

They were stood down a side street. Sirens could be heard and every few moments a *Prowler* soared overhead, its tracker sponsons swivelling in all directions as the Corporation troops sought desperately to find them. It was so low, Skye could see the trooper sat within the sponson bubble clearly, his face devoid of all emotion as he kept his attention focused to the sensors.

Skye turned her head away as a blast from its repulsors kicked up dust and debris, swirling it around them all as it soared away. When it had gone, she turned to Coulson.

"What next?"

Coulson finished checking over his rifle, slung it over his shoulder and pulled out a small comlink. "Nothings changed."

He tapped a code into it then slid the comlink away.

"Nothings changed? We have the Corporation after us, people trying to kill us at every moment and on top of that I left my datacards back in the bar so I have no money."

"Like I said, nothings changed. Come on."

He headed west, keeping to the side of the alley so any *Prowlers* that passed overhead wouldn't be able to make them out. Skye hurried to keep up.

"Wait... where are we going?"

"*Hades Promise*. You wanted off world right?"

"But that's the space-port."

Coulson paused, waving for them to keep still. At the mouth of the alley a platoon of Grunts jogged past. "Of course it's at the space-port. Where else would I keep my spaceship?"

"But they'll be looking for us there."

"Probably. Now keep quiet. We're almost there."

They started moving again.

Grimm's face crumpled in puzzled realisation.

"Wait... did she say she's no money?"

The space-port was crawling with Corporation Troopers, Marauder Grunts and a *Strider*

Team. The large biped walkers guarded the main entrance to the port while the troops were stretched out in a long firing line. Citizens were being turned away after a quick frisk down. It was okay when the Corporation troops did it, but the Marauders were a bit more heavy handed. As she watched, Skye saw a young man crumple under the scrutiny of one of the green skinned mercenaries.

“We'll never get through all that lot,” Skye groaned.

“Yes we will,” Coulson said. He dropped his rifle. Grimm did the same. “Give me your pistol,” he said.

Without thinking she handed it over. “Why? What are we going to do?”

“Give up.”

He stepped out into the street, hands raised. Grimm followed and after a moment so did Skye.

A Marauder saw them and ran over, his wicked looking Hrunka knife raised high in one paw, an odd clunky gun in the other.

“Come wiv me,” it growled, jabbing Coulson in the back. He winced but kept his mouth shut as they were led up to the Corporation blockade. The Section Leader saw them and held up a hand. The Marauder stepped forward.

“Gots me some captives,” it said in broken All-Speak. “Tekkin 'em to the bossman.”

“The High Marshall isn't here. He's over at the presidential palace.”

“Tekkin me shuttle over there. Orders.”

Coulson looked at Grimm who rolled his eyes. Skye was terrified.

The Marauder moved closer to the trooper and bent down. Drool slobbered from its jaws as he growled out the single word again. “Orders.”

Swallowing deeply, the trooper stepped aside.

With another jab in the back with the knife, Coulson and the others were marched inside the space-port. Before Skye knew it they were stood in Docking Bay 93. A battered looking freighter waited, its engines already powered up. In the cockpit viewport she could see a Forge Father, his beard decorated with beads and gems. He gave a curt wave.

“What's going on?” Skye asked.

“We're leaving,” Coulson said.

Grimm pressed a button and the entry ramp came down. The Marauder shrugged off its Corporation jacket, letting it fall to the docking bay floor. He spat on it.

“This is Tudyk,” Coulson said. “My pilot.”

“Too-dick,” Skye repeated. “Strange name. Why's he called that?”

The Marauder reached for his belt but Coulson grabbed him and shook his head. “Not now.” Tudyk grumbled and disappeared inside the ship, just as a shout came from the corridor followed by running footsteps. “Seems our ruse has been rumbled. Are you coming?”

He gestured to the open ramp of *Hadors Promise*.

“I have no money,” Skye said. “I can't pay you.”

“Well, I've seen you fight. You ain't no shirker, that's for sure. I could always use another good pair of eyes too.”

“Are you offering me a job?”

Energy blasts started to explode around them. Troopers appeared in the entrance to the docking bay, their rifles spitting out beams of blue and red.

“Let's talk about this inside.”

The pair ran inside the ship and the ramp raised up.

As Corporation troopers ran into the bay, the ship lifted off. The beams of the hand weapons bounced harmlessly off the ships hull plating as it soared up into the night sky of Damark IV and to freedom.