

Another Day in the Life

FADING SUNS fanfiction

by Liam R.W. Doyle

Arcadia clicked the transceiver button. “Zekeel, you have the charges set?”

“I do not think this idea is very wise.”

“When have you balked at an exciting and adventurous idea in favor of wisdom?”

“Whenever you insist on ‘going in alone,’ when there are a hundred armed soldiers meters away, and when there are several kilos of high explosives involved. Yes, I think that is when wisdom is prudent.”

Arcadia scratched the back of her head with the barrel of her pistol. “Oh now, how often have we been in a situation like that, really? Only once or twice before, maybe. Stop complaining.”

After a pause, Zekeel replied, “They’re set.”

“Fantastic! I’m going in.”

“Of course you are.”

She switched the radio to silent notification and checked the rounds in her pistol. “Those codes better work,” she mused aloud, then stood up from out of the shadow and stepped into the slightly less shadow. Keeping to the wall, Arcadia flowed down the corridor silent and slow. The decorative beveling of the walls in the base looked unique and artistic, but had the unanticipated effect of baffling noise rather well -- which she was about to test.

When she reached the intersection where all shadow was killed by the light coming from where she needed to go, Arcadia paused, stood up straight, took a deep breath, and thumbed the pistol’s safety off. “Now or never,” she intoned her personal mantra.

The guard at the door was thinking about the cookies Josef had brought that morning. How many times had he and some of the others given Josef crap about their being “ginger-flavored rocks.” *Surely it can’t be that hard to make cookies*, he thought. *What, thousands of years of human civilization and this guy can’t make a proper batch of cookies.* What’s the benefit of being able to stay in the furnished apartments in this base instead of the spartan barracks he’d known for years, if they couldn’t use the kitchenettes

properly. *By the stars, this indigestion is going to last all shift. What's that?* He turned to the sound of steps coming from around the corner.

“You, hold. What are you do-” Arcadia raised her pistol and fired twice at the surprised guard. The first shot grazed his neck but the second hit him center of the throat. He dropped to his knees clutching his neck and then fell on his face where a pool of blood formed around his head.

Arcadia sprung to the door panel, avoiding tripping over the body. No alarm indicator. If she had timed everything properly, no one else was on the floor right now and the sound should have alerted no one. The guard didn't have a chance to trip an alarm. All seemed well.

She pulled the jury-rigged patcher from her jacket. A storage disk attached to an open chip with a patch cable soldered to it. She'd spliced it together on the trip to the base, hoping the info the disk contained (acquired at some cost) was valid. “Now or never,” she said thoughtlessly and plugged the cable into the panel interface. The panel display flashed a series of alphaneumerics before turning black. Arcadia's breath caught in her throat. Then, almost as an afterthought, the red light turned green and the lock on the door clicked off. Smiling, Arcadia pushed the door open and stepped past the threshold.

As she padded into the room and the door slid shut behind her, the room's lighting slowly increased, illuminating the massive yet stark space. The light gray coloring of everything was interrupted by a computer console and a pedestal erupting from a hole in the middle of the floor. Her intel indicated there wasn't any security beyond the door, but her experience taught her to be half as trusting and twice as careful. She made her way around the edge of the room looking for anything unusual, opening her intuition to gut feelings.

Once around, satisfied, she walked to the pedestal and the datapad sitting atop it, connected by a ribbon cable to the room. Most of the time, the Second Republic artifacts she discovered were coated in dust of centuries. Like the rest of this recently uncovered base, this artifact was as clean as her thoughts. Well, maybe Nadin's thoughts. On second thought . . . Arcadia realized she and her companions might actually not be entirely “good guys” . . .

She carefully removed the ribbon cable and the datapad woke up, going into a standby mode. She rummaged through her collection of Second Republic interface adapters and found the one she needed. It plugged neatly into the side of the pad and her own personal computer: a device that, ironically, would get her into more trouble with the Church than

any of her lock-disabling tools would. She started up the stored processes and smiled at the moving progress bar.

Then the door blew in.

On the other side, crouching soldiers filled the corridor, along with a couple of techies with metal cutters and blow torches, and a very upset Captain Boulange. They must have been out there, trying to get in, for some time. How long? She looked down at her forgotten radio still set on silent. The message indicator light blinked furiously. Crap. Well, not much she could have done with Zekeel's warning in any case.

"The datapad, please." Boulange said with his hand out.

Arcadia clutched the device to her chest. Perhaps the unknown state and delicateness of the device was what kept him from ordering her full of holes and just taking it. "That didn't sound like a sincere request," she stalled, "I think you can do better than that."

Captain Boulange gestured into the room and several armed guards ran in and took up positions around her. She watched, thinking, *just a little more time*. The captain strode in and stopped just close enough to possibly not be hit by a missed shot from one of his soldiers. He put his hand out again. "Out of respect for what happened at Istakhr, I will ask you one more time. And then I have no more patience for you, Miss Arcadia. The datapad."

Oh, she thought. *That's right*. She was off her game that day on Istakhr. He thinks her hesitation when she had the chance to kill him and didn't was mercy and not simply jitters from 'throx' withdrawal. Well, that was lucky. Who knows, Arcadia thought, maybe fortune again this day would grant her yet another card to keep and play later. She looked around, slowly, taking in all the guns trained on her and sighed as defeated a sigh as she could. With hope that it had been long enough, and without looking, she thumbed off the connection to her computer and handed the datapad over to Boulange.

The captain smiled a thick and sickly smile as he passed the device over his shoulder to an eager techie, never taking his eyes off of Arcadia's. "Well, my diminutive and troublesome girl," Boulange began as he pulled his sword from scabbard, "I think you may have overestimated-" The explosion that shook the base interrupted the captain's gloat.

The soldiers in the corridor, half getting back on their feet, were looking down the corridor with various expressions of fear and anger. The captain turned and looked behind him, out the door. Several smaller explosions vibrated the floor through their boots. Captain Boulange, forgetting Arcadia entirely at the prospect of losing this greatest

acquisition of his criminal career, ran to the door while ordering his men to defend the base at all costs.

Arcadia glanced down at her computer's display as she continued the countdown under her breath. She smiled at the "data copy complete" message waiting for her. She reached "one," then "zero" in her countdown, and whispered, "now or never," before exhaling all breath from her lungs and holding it with eyes screwed closed. When nothing happened for several seconds, Arcadia opened an eye and mumbled, "The hell?" just as the back wall of the lab exploded and debris, and Arcadia, being immediately blown out into space by the decompression.

* * *

Arcadia limped down the back hallway of the dive that served as Krelig's latest headquarters on Bannockburn. No doubt chosen for convenient proximity to some slave-trade deal with the Muster. Zekeel walked as threateningly as possible, which was exceedingly threatening, behind her. They passed several armed, and particularly smelly, button-men before coming to the last door. The raucous laughter and music from the tavern above them filtered down. Arcadia was happy her hearing hadn't been permanently damaged, but it was a risk she'd been willing to take.

The guard at the door looked her up and down, pausing at the variety of bandages she wore, and rested on her stony expression without giving Zekeel half a glance. She was amused that she was more intimidating than her big and dangerous companion and reminded herself to tease him about that later. The guard knocked on the door three distinct knocks.

After a moment of everyone glancing at each other and shifting weight on different feet, the door opened and another guard nodded into the room. Arcadia and Zekeel shifted past the guards and into the dim room that smelled of stale beer and stale hope.

Boss Krelig was in the process of yelling at a mousy fellow with sleeve garters and ink-stained fingers. Something about receipts and skimming she didn't care anything about. She looked at Krelig's personal guard standing behind and to his left, an arm's length away from him. Arcadia recognized her -- Braids. A dangerous woman capable of changing the gender on a fly with a thrown dagger at hundred feet. She wore her hair in braids that seemed more appropriate on a girl running blithely through fields of heather. But on Krelig's personal assassin, it gave a disconcerting innocence to death incarnate. If Krelig was using Braids as his guard today, Arcadia knew he was scared of something, and she wasn't arrogant enough to think it was her and Zekeel. Even so, she thought, best not to test him.

Boss Krelig finally dismissed the well-chastised man and turned his attention to Arcadia even before the guy was out the door. “You’ve got some big ones coming to me. What makes you- . . . the hells happened to you?” Arcadia shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. What makes you think I won’t take the opportunity to close the book on you and your friends here, now? You walking right into my house.”

“Enemy of my enemy,” she said.

“Ha! I heard what you did to Boulange, and don’t think I’m not greatly amused. But don’t also think that makes us friends for one second.”

“No, but it does make me think it’s enough to get me here to talk to you, face to face.”

Krelig pierced her with his well-practiced stare. Arcadia began to doubt if this was a good idea. “Well, you’re right about that.” He seemed to relax into his chair, and everyone, except Braids, relaxed just half as much in response. “You got it, then?”

Arcadia nodded. “Checked and confirmed.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll have to see about that. You’re not stupid enough to come here with it on you, I know that much. So, where is it? And what do you think you’re going to get for it?”

“A reset. Square us up.”

“You’re not stupid, but you’re not too bright either,” he said. Arcadia bristled but kept her face impassive. She noticed Braids narrowed her gaze. Damn, Arcadia thought, she’s good. “Here’s my counter offer: I let you walk back out of here with everything you walked in with, and let you keep walking for another year. Give you that long to make back what you owe me.”

“And the data cuts what we owe you in half?”

“Ha!” Boss Krelig looked genuinely amused. “I’m feeling good and your sad state fills this old heart with pity. It cuts a quarter off. And that’s more than you deserve four times over.”

Arcadia returned his humorless smile. “Well,” she said, “I guess that’s an offer too good for us to refuse.”

“There you go. You’re smarter already. Now get out of here and give Baldrig the location on your way out.” He instantly turned his attention to one of the other lackeys in the room and started yelling about receipts and lack of skimming, Arcadia and Zekeel entirely

forgotten. Although Braids hadn't forgotten. She continued to stare at Arcadia even as she turned and walked out.

Arcadia realized, whether or not Boss Krelig was using Braids as his personal "man" out of fear for some other threat or not, the fact that he was letting them go and trusting her to leave the directions to the data without leaving a hostage, meant he was using Braids as a message to her: Don't screw me, or you'll have certain death chasing you across the galaxy. Arcadia couldn't suppress the shiver.

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