

Strange New Worlds

an *Andor* fanfic

by Rodo

for *tablelamp*

THE BOY STILL looked dazed from the drowser when Maarva looked back. She tried to reassure him with a smile, but there was no time. They were in the clouds, and the Republic frigate was approaching. Clem nodded when she looked at him, so Maarva pulled the steering lever back. The ship picked up speed and she could hear the small gasp from the boy who had likely never been subjected to G-forces quite like this, given he couldn't even speak Basic. Ideally, someone would have talked him through it, but that wasn't an option. The ship began to rattle and shake as Maarva was pressed back into her seat until finally, in what felt like a single second, everything felt much, much lighter. They were in space and the ship's systems kicked in properly. Clem took care of the calculations for the jump to hyperspace while Maarva savored the unimpeded view of the galaxy spread out before her, then suddenly, there was nothing to occupy her mind but time and a strange young boy cowering on Clem's bunk. For a moment, Maarva wondered whether she'd done the right thing. But then she shook her head. The boy would have died if they'd left him. The problem now was to figure out what to do with him.

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They left the boy on the ship, under the watchful eye of B2EMO, even though he wouldn't have understood the conversation they were about to have anyway – he'd babbled at them in whatever language they spoke on Kenari and hadn't understood a word either Maarva or Clem had said for the entire journey through hyperspace. Ferrix would come as a shock to him, that much was certain. Where Kenari was green and lush, Ferrix was red and dusty. His name was Kassa, that was about the only useful thing they'd gotten out of him. There was little they could do for him, but what they could, they would. So they'd try to spare him what might very well turn into an argument – if the way Clem worried at his lip was anything to go by.

“What now?” he asked her. The answer had to wait – one of the shipyard workers walked past and nodded at them, on his way back home likely, considering the time of day. “We can’t keep him.”

“He’s not a pet,” Maarva said.

“You know what I mean,” Clem said. “He needs... something. Someone to help him. By the stone, we’re barely at home as it is. There’s gotta be someone better out there than two small time scavengers like us.”

But Maarva could tell from the look on his face that he didn’t believe his own words. Clem knew, just like she did, that there was no one to take the boy off their hands. Kenari was supposed to be off-limits; so the boy shouldn’t exist. Taking him to any of the proper institutions would get them all in trouble, Kassa included, and taking him to some of the... less savory people offering to take care of lost children orphaned by war or misfortune wasn’t an option. The thought alone made Maarva’s skin crawl.

“I don’t think we’ve got much of a choice, Clem.”

Clem huffed and shook his head. “We’ll find someone eventually. There’s enough good people out there in the galaxy who’ll be glad to take care of him. Just need to find them.”

Maarva nodded and might have believed him, but even back then there had been a part of her that had known better, a part that had known that the boy had already found the right people, even if they were off-planet half the time and not as desperate to be parents as some – they’d never planned on having any children at all. But they’d found him and they’d saved him. He was theirs, for better and for worse. Maybe it was fate, maybe it was coincidence, but it was what it was.

“He’ll need a better name first, and a story that won’t raise eyebrows,” she told him.

“Leave that to me. I know a guy from my freighter days.”



And so little Cassian had joined their family – on a temporary basis, at first, or so they told themselves. They’d told people he was the son of acquaintances of theirs, miners from Fest who’d died in an accident, leaving poor little Cassian with a head injury that had affected his ability to speak Basic. Not that he attempted to speak much. Once the first desperate rush of words had failed to get him what he wanted, he’d stopped talking. Maarva had thought he’d shut down completely, traumatized by the culture and climate shock, until she noticed his eyes. Cassian was a bright little boy, and he watched everything that went on around him, soaking up knowledge like a sponge.

He was wary of them too. Maarva understood why, as did Clem. With something big brewing on the horizon, they were too busy with work to spend much time at home anyways; they left him in Bee's care, with Jezzi dropping by when she had time to feed the boy properly. And by some miracle, Cassian and the droid got on well – after a couple of weeks, they had become fast friends. Maybe Bee not being human made it easier for the boy to trust him. Sometimes she wondered what Cassian had gone through before they'd found him. No boy should behave the way he did – like a scared animal hiding from predators.

“No, you're doing it wrong,” the tinny voice of Bee cried when Maarva entered the house laden with groceries one day. “Stop it! I told you to draw the other one.”

When Maarva turned, she found the two of them on the floor, hunched over a bunch of cards. It seemed the droid had thought it prudent to teach the boy how to play sabacc – why, Maarva couldn't tell. Maybe it was because droids thought anything involving probability made for good entertainment. Or maybe he'd run out of ideas. Children could tire out everyone. A quick glance at the cards told her that Bee was losing. Considering the small smile on Cassian's face, he knew it too, and since Bee lacked the hands needed to handle his cards, Maarva suspected that the boy played dumb on purpose whenever he did what Bee told him to. She watched him put down a card on his side, and the triumphant smile on his face only served to reinforce her suspicion.

“Well done,” she said, and both the boy and the droid swerved to stare at her.

“He's doing it wrong,” Bee argued. “I would have won if he hadn't drawn the wrong card for me.”

Maarva smiled and raised an eyebrow, and Cassian had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Clem's coming with some circuits he thinks we can salvage – could you go help him, Bee?”

Bee didn't have to be told twice. He wheeled out of the door behind her, leaving Maarva alone with Cassian, who was picking up the cards. He looked like a normal little boy now, if you didn't know better. He wore proper clothes and shoes and Clem had even managed to coax him into getting his hair cut the week before.

“And you can help me make dinner, Cassian,” she told him. When he pretended he didn't understand her with his large, brown eyes blinking in fake confusion, she added, “I know you understand me, so chop, chop. These vegetables won't peel themselves.”

After a moment, he heaved himself off the floor with a dejected sigh and followed her into the kitchen.

“Can I go back?” The question had been asked in an uncharacteristically small voice. Usually, Cassian was a confident boy, as they’d found out once he’d found his footing on Ferrix and made some friends among the local children. He was charming and seemingly open and more trouble than both she and Clem had anticipated, but it did her heart good to see him thrive. They’d never talked about what had happened on Kenari, apart from that one awkward conversation where they had tried to explain to him what would have happened to him had he stayed, early on. “They won’t be looking for me now, will they? That was ages ago.”

Maarva had thought the topic long settled, but evidently not. She exchanged a look with Clem, who was sitting at the table with her, tinkering with a circuit board, then focused on Cassian, who had buried himself in a nest of blankets on the armchair. He still hadn’t gotten used to the cold – not that Ferrix was that cold, really.

“I don’t think there’s anything to go back to,” Clem replied. He wasn’t looking at the boy, so he didn’t see his whole body stiffen and contract under the blankets. Maarva wanted to hug him, but she knew he wouldn’t let her. Whatever had happened to him on Kenari, it had turned him into a standoffish boy, even if he came to trust someone.

“But I have to go back,” he murmured, barely more than a mop of dark hair among the blankets.

“Why?” The question surprised her, even though she’d been the one to ask it. She could think of a dozen reasons, if she tried.

Cassian didn’t answer immediately. Instead, his head poked out and she could see him worrying at his lip. He tended to do that when he didn’t quite know if he wanted to say something. Finally, he huffed and opened his mouth. “I need to go back to Kerri.”

“Kerri?” Maarva asked.

Cassian refused to look at her, or even in her general direction. Instead, he stared at Bee, recharging in his corner, for a long time. Clem had abandoned the circuit board and looked at her with a question in his eyes. He didn’t know either.

“My sister,” Cassian finally said. “My little sister. I promised her I’d be back.”

The words stung, deeply. Ever since they had rescued the boy, Maarva had done her very best to avoid thinking about what had happened to the rest of his people. They had been innocents too, just like him – inhabitants of some backwater planet who didn’t know what was happening to them, most likely. But they couldn’t have saved them as well. She and Clem would have died for the trouble. And Cassian. They were just two people. What chance had they had against the Republican navy?

“Cassian...” she began, but words failed her. She looked at Clem, hoping he’d find a way to explain the truth to him. Her husband, of course, just opened his mouth, then closed it, not being able to say the words on his mind. He was so softhearted, her Clem. Most days, she loved that about him. Not today.

“Tell you what, Cassian,” Clem began, “if we’ve got time on our next job, we’ll see what we can find out.”

Maarva tilted her head backwards and sighed. No, today Clem was definitely not sleeping in her bed. But she wouldn’t throw him out of the house altogether to sleep at a friend’s – she didn’t have the heart, after seeing Cassian’s hopeful, bright eyes.



“Atmosphere readings are clear,” Clem’s voice told her over the comm.

It wasn’t a surprise. Last time, it had been the same. She wondered why the Republic had issued the warning, and how many people knew the truth of it. There was nothing on Kenari, as far as she knew. Nothing except a few abandoned mines and a whole lot of overgrown vegetation. Nothing Cassian had told them in preparation for the trip had sounded like there was anything of worth down here. And yet, the warning issued across the sector said something else.

“Be careful,” Clem added before he lowered the ramp.

Not that he needed to remind her. Maarva stepped out of the hold gun in hand, ready to shoot anything that moved. The clearing they had landed on should be half a kilometer from the village, if Cassian’s recollection could be trusted. It was, dare she say it, “picturesque”. Green trees with ample foliage, pretty birds hopping from branch to branch, and flowers sprouting wherever the sun reached the ground in spite of the thick canopy. It made Kenari an unsettling world to Maarva, who had grown up around bare rock, thick walls and lithium ponds. A planet shouldn’t have this much life. She almost shot something that scurried up a tree trunk when the sudden movement startled her.

“Take care of the ship while I’m gone,” she told Clem, then she started marching.

For all its life, Kenari was a lonely planet for a human. That much became clear after the first hundred meters. There was life around here, but none of the teenage warriors Cassian had warned her about. She didn’t need to use the foreign words he’d taught her. All she need to do was follow the overgrown path and not get distracted by the unnerving birds that seemed to gossip about her. All the way, she wished she was back on Ferrix, walking down Rix Road to the sound of hammers and welding lasers.

She found the village much as Cassian had described it, and again, she felt sorry for the boy. The life he had lived... no child should have to go through something like that, much less a whole bunch of them. It was a miracle they had survived as long as they had – but no longer. There was no life to be found among the shacks when she arrived. It hadn't been that long since they'd found Cassian, so the forest hadn't yet reclaimed its territory yet, but the life was gone. Maarva estimated it must have been around the time of the shipwreck, but she wasn't an expert and the state the bodies were in was... bad. There were so many, scattered around the place by scavengers, turned into something that was barely recognizable as former human beings by months upon months of decay and predation. She was glad it was only her here. Clem... he wouldn't have been able to cope. And Cassian was too young to know the extent of it. It was no use looking further. If there had been survivors, they would have buried or otherwise treated the bodies, not left them where they lay. Maarva turned around and walked back.

It was strange; the birdsong didn't bother her on the way back. She barely heard it at all.



The hopeful look on Cassian's face fell away the moment he saw their faces when Maarva and Clem arrived back home. In an instant, it was replaced by tears and the kind of shuddering crying that paralyzed Maarva. The thing that struck her the most was that he didn't make a sound, even though his face was covered in tears. He was shaking and shivering and he looked at her with pure desperation, but not even a whimper escaped his lips. It was that more than anything that made Maarva sit down next to him on the floor, awkwardly wrapping an arm around him for the first time.

"I'm sorry," she told him, while Clem sat down on the boy's other side.

He cried for so long, her back was starting to act up, but Maarva didn't dare move. Cassian needed them now, just like he had needed them when they first found him, even if he hadn't known it. He had no one else. With startling clarity, she realized that they were it, whether they wanted to be or not, whether Clem still looked for someone to take him in whenever they went off-planet. He was theirs now, and they were his. She would never be able to let him go to another family, even if they found one. She'd seen what had happened to everyone he had known, and she wanted to cling to him with all that she had after that.

Clem was the one who told Cassian what they had found, leaving out any of the details that he had managed to infer from her clipped description of the village and what she'd

found there. With every gentle word, the boy wept harder, and there was nothing she could do to spare him the pain.

“Could one of them have survived?” Cassian asked, once the sobs had subsided enough for him to form words.

Maarva and Clem exchanged a look.

“It’s unlikely,” Clem said. “Maybe they took some of the smaller ones off world instead of killing them, but it’s impossible to tell.”

That softness again. This false hope might get the boy in trouble one day. The pain that he spared Cassian today would only come back with twice as much force later, even if there was a real possibility that his sister was still alive. He would never find her even if she was. The galaxy was too big, and they were too small.

Cassian murmured something in his own language between sobs that neither of them understood. It was Bee who perked up – it seemed he’d picked up some things from Cassian in all the hours they’d been left on Ferrix on their own.

“I’m all alone now,” Bee translated.

“No, you’re not,” Maarva said. “You’ve got us. And you’re not going to lose us anytime soon, I can promise you that.”

The crying didn’t stop, but the boy curled up closer to her, burying his face in her shirt. Clem leaned in closer too, until Cassian’s body was almost entirely enveloped by theirs. Maarva leaned her forehead against Clem’s and closed her eyes.

This was what family felt like, she thought. It was a strange feeling, a foreign one, something she never expected to have for herself. Something she’d never wanted before, but when she felt Cassian’s small body against hers, she couldn’t rue it; she loved that boy, and she’d love him till the day she died. It was both an exhilarating and a scary thought, and it only made her hug them both tighter. She’d do her best to give him the life he deserved. She would be there for him where others could not be. She swore it to his dead mother, father and sister while she carefully ruffled his hair. Cassian would live, he would thrive. She would make sure of it. She was his mother now, after all.

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