



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction

POV: Shadow Games

By Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder
and Jane "Shadow" Nagatomi

[Delphine system on board the freighter Starstruck]

"Come on Mark. Where are you??" Jane Nagatomi spoke out loud to herself as she stared out the viewport into the inky blackness. She'd been waiting for over an hour now and was showing definite signs of impatience. She fidgeted restlessly in her seat as she checked her instruments again, looking for any signs of a ship jumping into the system.

"Mark, you are going to owe me big time making me wait like this. You know I hate waiting... and why *am* I talking to myself??" She sighed and shook her head, thinking back to her conversation with Mark a couple days ago over the comm....

She had dragged herself from her bunk to the comm station when the call came through. "Mark, you'd better have a *very* good reason for getting me up like this," Jane said, very annoyed at having been woken up. "It's oh-eight-hundred ship's time and you know I'm not a morning person!"

Mark laughed, clearly amused at her disheveled appearance. "You haven't changed a bit Jane," he said. "It's been, what? 3 years now? I'm amazed you've even managed this long with that attitude!"

"Four years now," she replied, running her fingers through her hair. "It's been four years since we worked together."

Mark gazed at her for a long moment lost in thought of the years that had gone by. "It certainly has been a long time," he said quietly. "But things change, as do people. Which brings me to the reason I'm calling."

"Which is?" Jane prompted.

"Well, I've gotten into some other work lately which I think you'd be good at, and would like to get into as well. At least a bit anyways. I will warn you, the pay isn't exactly the best, but the rewards are well worth it."

Jane frowned slightly at the face on the screen. "Now I'm confused. You just said the pay isn't the best, yet the rewards make it worthwhile. Now either there are major bonuses to this work or you're talking about doing something good for people," she said. "Either way, I get the distinct feeling that I'm going to hear more than is good for me..."

Mark smiled slightly at her last remark. "Well, I'd like to meet with you and talk about it a bit, and maybe just get caught up with the last four years. It's been awhile Jane. I've heard some, well, interesting things about

your work." he said. "Did you really chase that pirate back through three systems?"

"I just don't like people who try to steal my cargo," she returned. "But I'd be glad to see you - when and where? I just finished the last bit of my run so I've got a bit of free time. I'm short handed right now though, I paid off my crew at our last port"

"Great!" Mark said, clearly pleased with himself. "You won't need any crew for this deal. I'll meet you in the Delphine system in about 36 hours. Oh-two-hundred your ship's time. I'm transmitting coordinates now."

Jane glanced at the coordinates as they came across to her computer. "Mark, this is out in the middle of nowhere!" she exclaimed. "This had better be good, or else!"

Mark just shook his head as he looked at her. He looked tired.

"I'll explain everything when I see you," he said. "One thing though..."

Jane gave the screen an inquiring look as he let his statement trail off.

"If I don't show up within an hour of our rendezvous, get out of there. Don't wait for me."

Surprise showed clearly on Jane's face. "What's..."

"No questions Jane," he interrupted. "Please, if I show up it will have been nothing, but if I don't show, get out of there immediately. I'll get in touch with you again later."

Jane stared at the face on the screen for a long moment considering his last statement. Mark had taught her just about everything she knew about smuggling; he'd been her mentor, and the only father figure she'd known. Even when he wasn't around she knew he'd been watching out for her. "All right Mark, but I'm counting on your being there," she said clearly, not entirely happy about not being fully informed. She only hoped he wasn't being pursued by bounty hunters. They could be such a pain.

[Part 2]

"Jane!" Her comm crackled to life, making her jump. Static filled her ears.

"Mark?? Mark!" she exclaimed, reaching for her comm and at the computer for any new ships in the area. Nothing, she was still alone.

"Sorry. I'm not going.... Ship's under att...."The transmission washed out in static as the signal kept breaking up. Realizing what was happening, she ran the comm signal through her navi-computer. She held her breath as she tried to hear what he was saying through the static.

"....to Avery... .. I'm... Remember ever... .. Force be... you."

Silence filled her ears after a final burst of static. Jane stared at the comm unit for a few heartbeats uncomprehending. "Mark! Mark! Come in!..." Her comm unit remained ominously silent. She looked at the navi-computer. As weak as the signal was, it had read the spacial coordinates that Mark had transmitted as a carrier wave piggybacked on the main signal. It was an old trick to send a location when you didn't want anyone who might be listening in to hear it. She entered the coordinates for his location and waited for the computer to make the calculations for the jump to hyperspace. Fear and anxiety welled inside her as she maneuvered her ship towards her jump point. She quelled it mercilessly as she watched the stars streak past and made the jump into hyperspace.

Jane sat in the cockpit of the freighter thinking about Mark as the ship hurtled through hyperspace towards his last known coordinates. Random memories flashed through her mind. When they'd first met; his teaching her how to fly a Z-95 for escort duties; and just the ins and outs of the smuggling trade. He'd taught her almost everything she knew, and just about set her up with her own ship and let her go when he felt she needed a change and a chance to grow. She knew that he still watched out for her after she'd left his group,

and they still kept in touch on occasion. He'd changed over the years and so had she, yet he always had a way of making her feel like a little child again. A signal on the control panel flashed indicating that they were about to exit hyperspace. Jane pulled herself back to the present as she re-entered normal space.

Debris lay scattered throughout the area. Ship's debris. She stared at the scene in horror, not quite comprehending what she was seeing. Her hands moved of their own accord over controls to ID the ships remains. Cargo containers littered the area; most of them were empty, but some retained their cargo. Very nice cargo at that. This made no sense to her at all. Why would anyone destroy a freighter yet not bother with the cargo? With the cargo untouched, it couldn't be a rival group or pirates or anything similar.

She looked at the results of her search. Ship's ID confirmed. It was the Angelique. There were no lifesigns on board, and none of the escape pods had been jettisoned. Mark's ship was lost with all hands on board. She started looking for the ship's log, anything that would give her a clue about what had happened to the ship. She paused for a moment staring at her hands. They were shaking and she couldn't steady them. She shivered as she tried not to think about what had happened and continued searching for the log. This was not the time to break down and lose control. She couldn't afford to; she had a job to do.

Several hours of exhaustive searching revealed nothing new to her. She was as confused as ever with no leads except the radio transmission she'd received. She considered the message again. Mark had mentioned Avery Schroeder, an old friend that she and Mark had both worked with on occasion. It had been a while since Jane had seen her last, Avery had been running some kind of scam out in Sector Q and she had helped Avery and some guy with a weird droid get into one of Tiren Andreth's space stations. Getting in touch with her would not be easy though, since she had all but disappeared some time ago.

"Avery might not be around much anymore," Jane said thinking out loud, "but Zack still is." She didn't know the nomad Zack very well, but knew that Avery considered him a sort of adopted brother. If anyone would, he would know how to find her.

Jane stared one last time at the destruction that floated before her. Unshed tears burned in her eyes but she couldn't cry, she wouldn't cry. Anger flared suddenly and burned within her. "Vengeance," she said softly. "I will avenge your death Mark, if I have to track the ones who did this to the ends of the universe and beyond. I will have my revenge."

[Part 3]

Jane stared at the dark figure on her comm in exasperation. "Look Zack, it's *really* important that I get in touch with Avery! Can't you just give me her current comm address?" She had been arguing with him for several minutes trying to find out how to reach Avery. However, for whatever reason, Zack had been most unwilling to give her that information.

The nomad crossed his arms. "She no longer journeys with my tribe, Jane. If I should see her, I will tell her you wish to speak with her, but I'm not certain where she could be found."

"Sure." Jane's voice took on a sarcastic edge. She didn't believe Zack for a nanosecond, and she wanted him to know it. "Look, I don't care what you're hiding or where Avery ran off to. Somebody killed a friend of mine and hers, and she needs to know."

Zack's eyebrows rose. "A friend? Who?"

"Mark Britt'kaid," she answered, her voice going flat as she tried not to show her grief. She shook her head and shoved her hair out of her eyes. "Can you at least get in touch with her and have her meet me at..." she trailed off for a moment, thinking of a suitable meeting place. "Have her meet me at Felix's ASAP. I'll be waiting."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, then sighed. "I can make you no promises, but I'll do what I can to convey a message."

"Thanks Zack. I really appreciate you help." Jane signed off and slumped in her seat. She stared at the stars for a long moment before shaking herself back to the present. The trail was getting colder, and she still had

to meet with Avery. Jane set course for Felix's and just hoped that Avery would show up quickly.

Jane sat at a small booth in the bar watching people come and go. It was almost 24 hours after her conversation with Zack and she was desperately tired, but determined to wait until Avery showed up. She glanced at the nerf burger that sat on her table, but quickly decided against it when her stomach rebelled at the very thought of food. She settled on ordering her favorite drink instead; a cafe Thursday. Mark had introduced her to the drink and the concept of Thursday's on Thursday.

Halfway through her drink she noticed a familiar figure enter the bar. She sat up as she watched Avery pause and scan the room. Jane motioned her over when Avery noticed her.

"Glad you could make it Avery," Jane said as Avery took a seat. "I wasn't sure how long it would take for you to get my message."

"Well, Zack contacted me and said that you were adamant about meeting me. What's up? And might I add that you look like hell?" Avery said looking at the small figure seated across from her.

Jane grimaced slightly and stared at her hands. "It's about Mark, Mark Britt'kaid," she said pausing for a moment to take a steadying breath. "I received a transmission from him almost 2 days ago in the Delphine system. He said he was... that he was under attack and wouldn't be able to meet me. He managed to transmit his coordinates." She looked up, "Avery, his ship was destroyed. All hands lost."

Avery looked a bit surprised at the news. "Oh, Jane, I'm sorry..."

Jane shook her head. "There's more," she interrupted. "Whoever attacked him wasn't after his cargo. I found some cargo containers still intact with cargo at the ambush site, so it couldn't have been a rival group or anything like that. And more to the point though," Jane paused studying Avery carefully for any reaction, "Mark told me to get in touch with you. Fact of the matter is, he told me to tell you about all this before I lost contact with him. So tell me Avery, what do *you* know about this matter? What was Mark involved in, who attacked him, and more importantly, WHY??"

"Slow down a moment Jane," Avery said soothingly. There was a trace of hysteria in Jane's tone which bothered her greatly. "I really don't know what Mark was involved in frankly, but I might be able to dig up some information."

Avery saw Jane back to her YT-1300 freighter and hung around till she was asleep. Then she made her way back to her own ship and got on the secure commlink to the nearest Alliance outpost. She had a sinking feeling that what she would find out would not make the situation any better. A little over four hours later her feeling was borne out. This was a mess and involved not only Mark Britt'kaid but the Alliance as well.

When Jane woke up she saw Avery sitting across the small cabin drinking from a steaming mug. "Good morning," Avery said. "I've found out something about what Mark was up to and have a very good idea who was behind his death. I think you should meet some friends of mine."

[Part 4]

The coordinates Avery gave Jane took them a bit off the usual smuggling routes, into a dense asteroid field that Jane had occasionally used to shake the local law enforcement. But as many times as she'd been through it, she'd never seen the concealed outpost, a tiny station hidden among the rocks, that Avery guided her to.

Jane grimaced as she coaxed the unwieldy freighter slowly through the rocks. "Avery, are you trying to get me killed or just make me crazy?"

"Neither, I promise. Besides, the last person I drove crazy did recover, after some time in a bacta tank," her friend replied with a grin. "Mind if I borrow your comm?" At Jane's nod she leaned forward and punched in a code from memory. "Hi boss, this is Foxfire. Are you ready to go?"

"As soon as I know where we're going, sure," a woman's voice answered. "You weren't all that forthcoming

when you contacted me."

"Sorry Shok's - communications in this area are too easy to eavesdrop on. I'll tell you all about it as soon as we dock."

"This should be good," the woman said with a smile in her voice. "We'll meet you at the dock."

Jane turned to Avery with a curious look. " 'Foxfire?' I thought you went by Dorothy Warner when you worked."

"Different job," she answered.

They docked smoothly, Jane's freighter looking absurdly large next to the tiny station, and were met by two women in flightsuits. Avery greeted them both with a smile, introducing Jane to them as an old friend. "Jane, these are Sherry and Michelle - they're, ah, also friends of mine."

Jane eyed the two women quizzically, then turned to Avery with a grin. "You know, you could have *told* me you ran off to join the Rebel Alliance."

She blushed. "I kinda figured showing up in an A-wing would tip you off - I just wanted to keep it quiet, or else things could get real interesting the next time I come here on leave."

Jane ran over a mental list of their mutual acquaintances and had to agree.

They adjourned to a small room just off the docking area, where Shok'wave took Foxfire aside for a moment. "Whatever you're planning, Avery, we need to get moving on it quickly," she said. "The commander of this station is getting a bit nervous - his operation depends on staying hidden, and several A-wings and a freighter aren't exactly discreet."

"We'll have to move fast anyway," she said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "This whole thing started when a friend of Jane's was killed by the Imperials - I've looked into a few of our records, and he was one of the few Alliance operators in this sector." She related their discoveries to Shok'wave and Taz. "Mark was transporting refugees from a planet called Quinlan to a transfer point somewhere in Sector Q, and was apparently on his way back from it when the Imps attacked him. Now they're scouring the area for the transfer point, and there's no telling how thoroughly they could disrupt this particular operation if they find it."

Shok'wave nodded thoughtfully. "So you want to take the A-wings and go hunting for the Imps. Any idea what size force we're after?"

"Fairly small, or they wouldn't have a chance of moving unseen. From the debris Jane found, I'm assuming a corvette and some TIEs for escort. It may take a while, but if we start at the ambush point and spread out into a search pattern, we should be able to intercept the force before it does any more damage."

"If it's still here-" Shok'wave began.

"I've got a better idea," Jane interrupted as she joined them, her voice calm. "They ambushed Mark because he was carrying refugees; if we send a freighter out along the same route, they'll assume it's doing the same thing and come running."

"Especially if we send out a few faked transmissions. I like it," Foxfire said thoughtfully. "But Jane, we don't exactly have ships to throw away around here, and the only freighter around is, well, yours."

"I know that," Jane retorted. "Just give me a chance to shoot back at them."

[Part 5]

The four of them left in A-wings a few hours later, with Jane's drone-programmed freighter flying well ahead of them. The freighter was barely within their sensor range, but was programmed to alert them at the first

attack from an Imperial craft. Foxfire was a bit uneasy about the whole plan - even with the A-wing's speed, it wasn't likely that they'd be in time to save Jane's freighter from a sudden Imperial strike. But it definitely was the plan with the best chance of succeeding.

She angled her fighter a bit closer to Jane's. "You're sure about this?" she asked over the comm-link.

"Yes, I'm sure," she answered, sounding a bit impatient. "There's a shortage of trained spacers out there, so there'll be no problem finding positions for my crew, and I own the Starstruck outright."

"What about you?"

"Go back to escort flying, I guess." Jane had spent some time flying Z-95s as an escort for free traders, something that Foxfire had mentioned several times while convincing her CO to loan out an A-wing. Flying an Alliance interceptor took skill, but so did holding a Z-95 together.

Shok'wave's voice came over both their comm-links, just as the freighter's alarm shrilled. "I'm getting Imperial contacts at maximum range - Jane, Foxfire, looks like you were right. I'm reading one corvette and a squadron's worth of TIEs."

Foxfire dumped power to her engines without thinking about it, matching speeds with her CO. Taz and Jane followed suit a moment later, and the four A-wings shot toward the Imperial task force. "Okay, ladies, I want this one by the numbers," Shok'wave said. "Clean up those TIEs before going near the corvette. Foxfire, take Jane on your wing and concentrate on the TIEs nearest the corvette; we'll take care of the outer fighters."

"Got it." Jane banked almost in unison with Foxfire as they swerved past the first groups of TIEs, and Foxfire's eyebrows rose in appreciation. Jane had gotten even better since the last time Foxfire had seen her flying escort - with talent like this, her friend was wasted out in Sector Q.

But that wasn't quite the problem to be thinking of when she had three TIEs in front of her.

She threw her fighter into a steep dive as the TIEs scattered from formation, hammering with linked lasers on the ship in front of her. "Flimsy little things, aren't they?" Jane commented over the comm, racing past just above Foxfire's canopy.

They followed the second group, a trio of Interceptors, within range of the corvette's defensive guns, with Foxfire dodging the green bolts and hoping one or two would hit the T/I on her six. She wanted to take the corvette out before it could resume the attack on Jane's freighter, but it wasn't looking good. And knowing Jane, she'd find some way to make Foxfire pick up the repair bill.

Her comm crackled with Jane's voice, the transmission weakened by the Imperial corvette between the two fighters. "Avery, you mind coming over here to break this up?"

"Right away." She pulled into a tight loop, shooting past the startled Interceptor pilot as he tried to follow her, and arced around the corvette to reach Jane. Her friend was engaged with the other two T/Is and dodging their fire effortlessly, but she couldn't line up a shot on one without leaving herself vulnerable to the other. Foxfire dumped power to her engines and raced up on the tail of one of the TIEs, a lucky dumbfire destroying it as she jinxed away.

"This must be a fun job," Jane said with a laugh. Then the tone of her voice changed. "That's done it - they're after my ship now."

As the two A-wings had gotten out of range, the Imperial corvette began to concentrate its fire on Jane's defenseless freighter. Foxfire could see its hull begin to buckle under the barrage. She banked sharply toward the corvette, hoping to distract the gunners, or maybe take out a turret or two. As she fired a set of concussion missiles, her comm came to life again.

"Ladies, we've got trouble. Get over here." PM Leader's voice was as calm as always, but for Shok'wave to admit to trouble meant serious danger indeed. Foxfire winced as she turned away from Jane's freighter - there was no question where her duty lay, but she didn't want to watch her friend's livelihood being destroyed.

"Leave it," Jane said calmly. "I'd really rather help out the ships with pilots in them."

They raced toward the embattled Shok'wave and Taz, Jane firing with pinpoint accuracy as a jinxing TIE came briefly within her range. "Nice shooting," Foxfire commented, slowing down and turning tightly to let a pursuing T/I overshoot her.

In her cockpit, Jane smiled at the compliment but didn't have the time to answer. She had a few other things on her mind...

"Fox, what's the status of that corvette?" Shok'wave questioned.

"Bad. Unless we can get past these fighters fast, it'll have the freighter destroyed and be into hyperspace before we can stop it."

As Foxfire and Shok'wave double-teamed the last of the Interceptors, Jane's hands flew over her console in a carefully prearranged pattern. The A-wing might be new to her, but any smuggler worth her profit margin learned *everything* about any ship out there. Including the computer systems - she'd done a tiny bit of slicing before they'd launched, and it looked like her planning would pay off.

The corvette seemed to pause before making its kill, and Jane finished the code she'd set up. A strange, high-pitched tone echoed for a moment over her comm channel as the freighter engaged the programming she *hadn't* told Avery about. The Starstruck shuddered and exploded as Jane triggered an overload in the already stressed engines, taking the corvette with it in a wave of energy and metal. She watched without expression as the two ships were destroyed in a blinding double fireball.

[Part 6]

"Avery, it was worth it," Jane said firmly, tugging off her borrowed helmet and shaking her head to clear it. They'd docked briefly at Xanadu, a thoroughly misnamed collection of mining stations built in and around an asteroid field, to regroup. Avery had made her way over to talk to Jane while Shok'wave and Taz were checking the A-wings for damage, and she was looking more than a bit worried. "I told you, I would have done anything to get the people who killed Mark."

Foxfire gave her a concerned look. "I figured you'd want a shot at them - that's why I asked Shok'wave to requisition a fourth fighter - but I wasn't expecting you to sacrifice your ship."

"We wouldn't have gotten that corvette without it," Jane retorted. "Besides which, it's my ship and I can blow it up if I want to."

Avery hesitated. "What are you going to do now? If you don't mind my asking."

"Go talk to the last people who hired me to fly escort, I guess," she said with a shrug. "It's not as easy, but it's a living."

"Well - I just spent a few minutes talking to Shok'wave. If you don't mind getting shot at, I've got a heck of a job offer for you..."

[On board the Frigate Mantiss]

Jane looked around at her new quarters on board the Frigate Mantiss, home of Praying Mantis Squad. Few personal belongings adorned the room. She sat on the edge of her bed staring off into space thinking about Mark and wanting to cry all over again about his death. Foxfire and the others were waiting below though, so she would not cry. Not again. She'd avenged his death with the help of her now fellow squad mates, but felt little better for it. Mark was still dead and nothing could change that.

She got up and went to a small jewelry box on her bureau and pulled out a small case. Inside was a tiny

gold pin of an angel. Mark had given it to her on her 21st birthday so very long ago.

"It's for good luck," Mark had said amused at Jane's shocked and rather dismayed expression. The galaxy's not all nice and pretty and you need someone to watch over you. Especially now that you're going completely on your own."

"Mark, I'm not a little kid anymore!" Jane said exasperated. "I wasn't born yesterday, and I've been through enough adventures with you to know to expect the worst!"

"Jane, I just wanted to make sure that someone would always be there for you," Mark said looking at her. "Just always keep it with you. You never know, someday you may want to remember me by it."

Jane stared at the tiny angel through a film of fresh tears and carefully pulled it out. She attached the pin to the lapel of her new uniform blinking rapidly. Some people might complain about her improper uniform, but she didn't care; let them complain. She needed her guardian angel now, especially since Mark could no longer be there for her. So much had changed when Mark died, and a part of her had died with him. Her chosen callsign described exactly how she felt; like a shadow of her previous self. No longer quite so carefree.

And yet, she couldn't say that she regretted anything that had happened either. Things had become too routine lately for her to be entirely happy, and with the loss of her freighter, it became that much easier to leave her previous life behind. A major chapter of her life was now over, and a new one just beginning. She still wasn't quite certain why she accepted Foxfire's offer of joining the Alliance. Certainly she was never one for taking orders easily! And yet, it felt right. There was nothing left anymore of her old life. Certainly nothing to keep her from joining the Rebels.

Shadow stared around her quarters one last time feeling a bit more at home. Foxfire and the others were still waiting and it was time for her to join the party! Feeling much lighter in spirit, she left her quarters looking for her new-found friends.

THE END



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