

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

# SQUID WARS

## EPISODE I

### INVADER FROM ANOTHER WORLD

I awoke after the crash with a blinding headache and a lungful of black smoke. Surrounded by my downed TIE fighter's wreckage, I struggled to wobbling feet as my dusty armor's white plates clattered against one another, somehow mostly intact after the "emergency landing maneuvers."

"Rebel scum..." I muttered to myself as I looked around the immediate area. I expected to see blaster bolts sailing in all directions overhead, but it appeared that this area of the planet we were battling over, Zatal, hadn't been touched by the ground battle yet. In fact, the beach I'd landed on was oddly tranquil. Peaceful, even, and in a way I'd not seen on other planets in the galaxy in my tenure as a Stormtrooper. Why were we fighting over a vacation spot?

I checked my comms unit, but didn't bother to try using it – the frayed wires spilling from its cracked chassis told me how effective that would be. Some stroke of luck kept my blaster pistol functional, even if my rifle was destroyed in the crash, so I wasn't *totally* naked down here. I slipped it into my holster and looked around the fallen fighter for any other surviving implements, but there wasn't much of use. I had a feeling I'd be down here a long time – maybe the rest of my short life, if I was assumed dead when I lost control.

The atmosphere seemed breathable, but I kept my helmet on just in case, for now. The bright sun – which didn't seem so bright in the atmosphere above the planet, I thought – would have been blinding without the eye protection afforded to me by the visor anyway.

As the waves gently lapped at the shore, I heard the sound of small footsteps running near me. My training-borne instincts kicked in and I dropped into a firing position as I drew my pistol, wondering what kind of predator, or hostile local, was coming to finish me off.

Instead, a group of human children stood stunned by my reaction. They didn't quite seem afraid of me – rather they were curious. They were barely dressed, the boys in short pants and the girls in one-piece outfits with various designs and patterns adorning them. It was then that I noticed my helmet's translator survived the impact, because I could understand what they were saying in their alien tongue.

"Is this a cosplayer?"

"He's really going all out, but I don't know what he's from. Some kind of Sentai show?"

"But what about the explosion and the crash? Was it special effects? There's still smoke, and it stinks pretty bad."

"Could be some kind of promotion for a new movie or something."

"Maybe Onee-chan will know."

I suppose "understand" wasn't quite correct...I had no idea what the children were talking about, but I could comprehend their language and that might get me out of here and back into the fight – or at least, back to the orbiting Star Destroyer I'd been calling home for the last few weeks.

The kids stood watching me almost expectantly, like they were waiting for me to do something. Unfamiliar with the customs on this planet, I holstered my blaster and slowly approached them, hoping my helmet could translate Basic to their language without much trouble.

"Uh, kids, do you know where any adults are? I need some help repairing my ship, and..."

"Woah! He's talking to us!"

"Is it an interactive show?"

"I can help with your ship, Onii-chan!" One of the girls ran to my feet, then looked up at me with excitement in her eyes of the kind I hadn't seen since I was conscripted into the Imperial army.

Usually kids ran screaming at the sight of a Stormtrooper in the *opposite* direction, especially on a planet like this which was doubtless teeming with Rebellion propaganda about us. Maybe their influence here wasn't as strong as the reports had indicated, I thought.

"Shut up, Tomoyo! He asked for grown-ups to help! There will probably be other characters appearing soon for the show."

"You don't know anything, Yuuta!" She stuck her tongue out at the boy.

I didn't have time for this. "Now, kids..."

"See? You're bothering him!"

Things were evolving into a childish brawl, but one of the boys stepped away from the chaos and spoke to me privately. "I know someone who can help you out, Onii-san. Come with me!" Good – one of the kids had a decent head on his shoulders. That, or it was a trap, but with no other good options besides trying to repair the ship with busted equipment and a soldier's brain, I followed him along the white sands.

The closer we got to the destination, the more I realized just how populous this beach was. A sheer wall to our left separated it from the rest of the planet, but I could see the roofs of houses poking up over the sides. The shores teemed with what I thought must have been the residents of those homes, relaxing and having fun as if there wasn't a life-or-death battle happening in the sky overhead. *What a carefree people*, I thought, then damned the Rebel scum for exposing such a peaceful world to their terrorism under the guise of liberation.

We arrived at a small building with mostly open walls and a sign overhead that translated to "Beach House Lemon," at least according to my helmet. The boy led me to the counter where a pair of girls stood talking, one with red and the other blue hair.

The redhead stopped mid-sentence when she saw the boy walk into the beach house with me. "Takeru...who's that?"

"Eiko nee-chan, have you seen Cindy-san and the Three Stooges around? This man says he needs help repairing his ship." The boy, who had introduced himself as Takeru on the way, gestured to me as he spoke, and the young woman, Eikoneechan – who I presumed to be his sister by their resemblance – gave me a wary look (as if I wouldn't be able to read her expression), probably because she recognized my armor and took me to be a bigger threat to them than I was.

"Er...no, I haven't seen them. But why would they be useful repairing a boat?"

"Um, if I may..." I interjected, thinking to speak up before the primitives' ignorance caused more confusion. "I'm Stormtrooper RC-323, a pilot, and I was shot down in the atmosphere. Somehow I survived, but my fighter is in ruins. If this Cindysan can help me, I'll be in your debt."

She blinked, then looked at the woman behind the counter – another sister? The blue-haired, slightly older girl shrugged, and said, "Well, I don't see a problem with it. I'm sure if you wait around for a while, she'll turn up." She gestured to one of the tables, and as I turned around I saw that the entire beach house was staring at us. I supposed my armor stood out compared to their near-nudity.

I took a seat at the table nearest the counter and thought hard about my next move. Supposing this Cindysan to be as capable as the boy thought she was, and ignoring that her assistants were called "the Three Stooges," I could be off the planet and back 'home' as early as tonight for R&R, and ready to redeploy in a new fighter tomorrow.

As I pondered further options and scenarios a timid, but very pretty, girl approached my table and shakily set down a glass of ice water in front of me. She looked away shyly as I turned to face her.

The two girls at the counter whispered to each other as if I couldn't hear their every word.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, Aneki?" asked Eikoneechan.

"I thought that, since he's wearing a mask, it might be easier for Ayumi-san to talk to him. It would be good if she got better at talking to men, you know?" said Aneki, the blue-haired girl.

Ayumisan's speech was too riddled with stutters for the translator to work properly, but I got the gist that she was taking my order. I said, "No, I'm okay, and I don't have money anyway," while waving her off. I *did* have some credits, but I wasn't interested in trying out the local cuisine.

She bowed and ran off. I caught a look of relief on her face before she turned away from me, then went back to my contemplation.

It wasn't fated to last long.

"323-nii-san," began Takeru, "while you're waiting, do you want to play?"

"I, uh..." I hadn't been asked to play since I was a boy.

"Takeru, you'd better leave him alone," said Eikoneechan. "He's probably had a long day and wants to rest." She had a knack for reading the room, it seemed.



I enjoyed the ambiance of the quiet waves and seabirds as I looked out at the beach. Some kids, including Takeru, were playing by the water and laughing. Aneki was a great chef – I could tell just from the aroma that her cooking was leagues ahead of the MREs I'd gotten used to. I started to get a little hungry and regretted turning Ayumisan away.

Just as I was thinking that there couldn't be many better places to crash-land, I heard a new voice: "Isn't this an interesting cosplay?"

I'd heard the natives use that word to describe my armor before, so I turned to face the source and ask what she meant by that. I expected a typical human – all the people on this planet had been so far – but was surprised to see a proper alien looking me in the eyes. No alien I'd seen on other planets before, either...then again, I hadn't seen any *ships* here, so it was possible that they hadn't figure out inter-system travel.

"What's it supposed to be, de geso? A sentai hero?" My translator had no clue what to make of her vocal tick. I had no clue what to make of her, period. In addition to the usual human limbs and features, from her head sprouted ten long, light-blue tentacles. I'd have thought her some variant of a Twi'lek were it not for her dress, which was flowing, white, and covered most of her skin save her arms – I'd never seen a Twi'lek without a bare stomach.

"Don't bother the visitor, Ika Musume. He's waiting for Cindy-san to show up."

The tentacled girl, who I guessed was Ika Musume, didn't like the sound of that name at all. "Cindy's coming? When? I don't want to—"

"IKA-CHAN!" Called a particularly shrill voice from the entrance of the beach house. A few loud steps echoed off the wooden floor before Ika Musume – or was it Ikachan? – slapped her away with an almost reflexive swing of her tentacles, otherwise paying her no mind.

The brown-haired girl who barely entered my peripheral vision before she was knocked away sailed through the air with a stream of blood spraying from her nose and a disturbingly euphoric look on her face. The rest of the beach house's occupants continued on as if nothing unusual happened, chatting away and eating while Aneki cooked and Ayumisan, along with another, dark-haired girl served them drinks. I took their yellow shirts to be uniforms.

Before I could react properly Ika Musume positioned herself across the table from me, posting on her hands and leaning forward. Even standing, she barely reached my seated height. "Now, what business do you have with Cindy de geso? You're not here to round me up for her weird experiments, are you de geso?"

"Well, I..."

"Hey! I said not to bother him, Ika Musume," called Eikoneechan.

"What? I just don't want to get put on an operating table or something, de geso!"

"I don't know her, yet. I just needed help with something and Takeru said she'd be able to lend a hand, is all."

She blinked, a little hesitant to believe me. Before I could speak up again, Aneki explained the situation about my crashed TIE.

“A crashed ship? Is that what all that smoke was earlier, de geso?” She paused a moment, waiting for affirmation from behind me.

Someone must have nodded, because she said, “I want to see, de geso!” I didn’t know how to react to that. “Can I?” I wanted to protest, but she looked so excited, tentacles wiggling, it was hard to turn her down. The little flaps on the sides of her hat wiggled back and forth, and I suspected that there was more alien to her than just tentacles.

Ika Musume and I walked across the beach together, stepping over the stunned girl from before (who Ika Musume called Sanae). Despite not knowing where the crash site actually was, she confidently lead the way. The smoke had been blown away by the sea breeze by this point, so she was really just leading me around the beach – which I quickly understood to be *her* beach, according to her.

“...so, are you an alien, de geso? Is that why you’re looking for Cindy’s help?”

I’d never been asked that question in my career as a Stormtrooper, and never expected to hear it, so I was taken aback – doubly so because of who asked me.

“I’m, uh...no, I’m not an alien.”

“But you’re not from this planet, right, de geso?”

“Well, no, but I’m human-”

“So you’re an invader like me, then, de geso?”

What was she getting at? And what did she mean, like her? “You’re not from this planet, Ika Musume?” We were walking toward a tall, throne-like wooden chair, and before she could answer me a voice called out from it.

“Hey, you!” The man in the chair jumped down in front of us, barring our path.

“Is this one bothering you?” I thought he was talking to Ika Musume, given that I was a stranger, so I didn’t speak up.

“Of course I’m not bothering him, de geso! He agreed to show me his fighter, Gorou!” Her mood changed instantly to anger at the sight of the muscle-bound man.

“You say that, but just yesterday you-”

“That was an accident, de geso!” Sparks flew between the two of them; I wondered if there was some kind of territorial rivalry between this Gorou, whose seat lent credence to the notion that he was an authority here, and Ika Musume, who laid claim to the entire beach.

I thought it best to defuse the situation, so I stepped forward. “I did say I would take her to it, sir,” I said, trying to sound respectful given his apparent position – I could be stuck on this planet a long while and making enemies wasn’t wise. They stopped their little quarrel and looked at me at the same time.

Ika Musume turned back to Gorou with a smug grin. Gorou turned to me and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Is that right? Well, then sorry to bother you. Just make sure to stay clear of the water – the tide is coming up soon and that cosplay looks like it would be hard to swim in.” Sooner or later I was going to have to figure out what the hell a cosplay was, and why they all thought I was wearing one.

“Right. Thanks, sir.” I bowed the way I saw Ayumi do it earlier before continuing along with Ika Musume, whose face was still adorned with that smug look.

“Serves you right for being a bother, de geso,” she said.

“What was that?!”

She stuck her tongue out at him as we walked away, and he blew it off. I wondered if their disputes ever devolved into serious conflict while we made our distance from him.

“Don’t mind him...that guy thinks he’s in charge around here just because he’s a lifeguard. That whistle doesn’t mean anything, de geso!”

“Uh-huh.” I pretended I had any idea of what she was talking about as we got closer to the crash site, walking past another beach house – this one called Southern Winds. It was mostly empty, but Ika Musume made sure to take a long way around the perimeter, looking around anxiously like she was avoiding something. Perhaps her iron-clad grip on the beach wasn’t so tight as she made it sound, I thought – then I recalled our earlier, interrupted conversation.

“You said you were an invader, right, Ika Musume? Are you not from this system?”

“I’m from the sea, de geso! Can’t you tell I’m a squid?”

“So you normally live underwater?”

“No, I live in the Aizawas’ house, de geso.” We were quiet for a second as I processed the torrent of information she was so casually pouring on me. She spoke like it was natural I knew what an Aizawa was or where they lived. She seemed to be thinking of something, too, since she had been very talkative on our walk so far.

“So why did you decide to invade, de geso?”

“I’m not really an invader, I just crash-landed here. But I guess I’m here because of the rebels.”

She perked up. “Yeah! Me too! The rebellious humans and their neglect have done a lot of damage to the sea, de geso! Aren’t you a comrade after all!?” She pivoted on her foot and turned to face me. “With you at my side, I know invading the surface will be a piece of cake, de geso!” Ika Musume beamed at me with her fists on her hips and hair, and tentacles, blowing in the wind. “Let’s get your ship repaired and get started quick! First we’ll make Chizuru give us fried shrimp so we won’t get hungry during the invasion!”

Before I could correct her we arrived at my crashed fighter. I grimaced at the sight of the wreckage. One of the ion engines was entirely separated from its body and the other had a massive hole, big enough for a child to climb through. The cockpit window was open, but the hinge was damaged and it dangled limply; it followed even the lightest breeze with a metallic groan.

Ika Musume didn’t seem to mind the damage. “So cool, de geso! Look, it even has guns on the front! Won’t this thing make the invasion a breeze?” She poked and prodded around the derelict ship with the kind of fascination I seldom saw in anyone save the most excitable Imperial engineers, playing with every knob and switch in the cockpit she invited herself inside.

I’d have rushed to stop her but there was no way a single one of those buttons was operational, so I just walked slowly over to her to make sure she didn’t break it further. I remarked that her kind would make for great pilots if they could tolerate flight – she used her tentacles like they were any old hand, and didn’t seem to even have to look at them to use them. In fact, she used them better than her human hands, with which she was a little clumsy.

When I made it to the cockpit and looked inside, I almost felt sick. I’d never seen the guts of a TIE in such a sorry state of disrepair. The lights were lifeless, wires spilled from multiple panels, and looking up I saw the cockpit window was cracked. More than a day’s work, for sure. At least I was, relatively speaking, safe down here.

Ika Musume mock-piloted the fighter using the steering controls, making laser sounds with her mouth and giving out nonsense call-signs to no one in particular, laughing and grinning all the while. Watching her wage her imaginary war, it occurred to me that she really had no idea the sort of things she would need to do to invade something, or someone. I could tell her experience with battle was nil – the idea of being a serious danger to someone wasn’t something she ever considered beyond the positive ramifications. She’d never really *been* that danger, or had to exercise the power of one if she had been. I don’t think anyone who’s shot down a ship, or felt the hot impact of a blaster bolt, or seen someone die, could play like this.

I envied her ignorance, but I didn’t begrudge her for it. How could I? It would be hating a Tauntaun for never knowing what it was like to be too hot.

I watched her play for a while before she turned to me. “This thing is great, de geso! Did you make it yourself?”

I shook my head, though I wondered if she could see the gesture given my helmet's rigidity. "No, it's a standard issue TIE fighter. My buddy in the engineer corps made some modifications to the hull, which probably saved my life, but they didn't afford me the protection against X-wing fire that he thought they might." She listened with rapt attention. "Anyway, I didn't have much to do with assembly, just flying."

"So there are more of these, de geso?! We could have a whole fleet at our disposal!"

"Something tells me the emperor wouldn't approve of that."

"Who's that?"

I almost didn't believe her. "The emperor...supreme ruler of the galaxy?"

She gave me a blank stare, like she was expecting me to elaborate. When I didn't she said, "do you mean Chizuru? She's strong, but I think I could take her if I was in the cockpit of one of these, de geso." She patted the dash like it was the trusty speeder she'd been driving for years.

There was no way the Zatalians didn't know who the emperor was. Something was very wrong – either with Ika Musume, or myself.

I didn't get time to consider it much, because a female voice from behind caught my attention.

"Is this it?"

Takeru spoke next. "This is where I found him."

I turned to see Takeru standing next to a tall, blonde woman wearing a sweater over her local dress, which I'd learned from conversation at the beach house was a bathing suit. She looked at me a little *too* intently, and I wasn't sure if she was scanning me for a threat or analyzing me for some other, possibly nefarious purpose.

"It's quite a wreck indeed, isn't it?" She spoke in a way that seemed neutral, but the fever-pitch with which she pored over the ship and its damaged components betrayed her interest. Then she opened her mouth again and gave it all away. "I've never seen anything like this, even in alien documentaries! This is bona fide alien tech!" Giddily she tinkered with the switches and buttons, Ika Musume having climbed out of the cockpit when the other arrived.

"You...must be Cindysan," I said, hoping to pull her attention away from the TIE and to my situation. "Takeru here tells me that you can help me repair my fighter."

She turned to me, blushing and wide-eyed with a kind of thrill that, frankly, frightened me a little. The woman was practically panting as she replied. "Yes, I'm Cindy," she began, "and I'm sure I could help you...but first I want to ask you some questions." She got a little too close for comfort, and my helmet's viewfinder couldn't even see her entire face. Her questions went by so fast I could barely understand them, other than that they weren't really for *me* in specific – she'd been rehearsing asking anyone she could these sorts of things for a long time.

"Which planet are you from? Neptune? It's Neptune, isn't it?"

"How long have your people been capable of interstellar travel?"

"Why haven't you responded to any Earthling messages?"

"Are more of your kind going to visit this planet?"

She kept asking more and more questions, which grew increasingly inane and inarticulate. The joy she displayed was almost child-like.

Finally she paused to breathe, and I got the chance to answer. "I was born on Pakuuni II, in the Pakuuni system. I don't know what Neptune and Earth are – if they're both part of the Zatal system, I haven't heard of them. And I don't think any Stormtroopers are going to be stopping by any time soon." Cindysan and the others went silent for a moment.

"You don't know what Earth is? You're on Earth, 323-nii-san," spoke Takeru from behind.

I was surprised to hear of locals referring to a planet by a name other than its official imperial designation, especially a world we'd had in our territories this long. "Is that what you call it? This is Zatal, the main planet of the Zatal system, located in..."

“I’ve never heard the word Zatal before,” said Cindysan, interrupting me. “Is that the aliens’ name for our sun?”

They couldn’t see it but my brow was furrowed inside my helmet, which itched a little, intensifying the frustration of trying to explain to someone that the name they’ve always called something isn’t correct, or at least isn’t correct to you.

Ika Musume took the silence to speak up for the first time since Cindy’s arrival – Cindy, who didn’t realize she was there, perked up a little. “And what’s a Stormtrooper? Is that the kind of invader you are, de geso?”

“Are you saying you don’t know what a Stormtrooper is?” The three of them nodded in unison, and at that point I began to consider that somehow, during the crash, I’d shifted course dramatically and simultaneously entered a comatose state that preserved my health while I drifted aimlessly throughout the galaxy until landing here, in uncharted territory. Of course, that was totally ridiculous and I abandoned that line of thinking immediately.

“Well, I suppose it’s not important,” I said, “since I’ll be leaving soon anyway.”

Ika Musume frowned at me and crossed her arms. “Leaving? Aren’t you going to help me with the invasion?!”

I thought I’d best let her down gently... “I’d like to, but I have another mission off this planet that I need to tend to, and it might take me a long time to get back after that.”

“But you’ll come back, right de geso?”

I paused for a second. Probably not, right? ‘Vacation time’ wasn’t a luxury we got in the army, and I doubted especially I would be given much slack given that I’d be AWOL for a while. Still... I nodded. She smiled again.

The sun was beginning to set. Cindysan, who had begun looking over the broken pieces of the TIE, looked out over the darkening horizon to the descending sun and said what I was just thinking: “There’s not much sense in working on it in the dark, and I don’t want to damage it by hauling it to the lab. Will it be alright if we wait until tomorrow?”

“That’s fine,” I began. She grabbed at my arm.

“In the meantime, you can come back to the lab for tests!” Her eagerness somehow wasn’t as infectious as Ika Musume’s... I wasn’t interested in partaking in whatever examinations she had planned for me.

“That’s alright, I’ll just sleep out here with the fighter.”

“No way,” all three said simultaneously. I looked over to Takeru and Ika Musume, surprised that they also protested my suggestion.

“You can stay at Lemon, de geso,” began Ika Musume.

“Yeah, I’m sure Chizuru-nee-chan won’t mind!” said Takeru. “Ika-nee-chan used to sleep there.”

I wasn’t going to turn down sleeping with a roof over my head, so I nodded. “Alright. Thank you.” Shaking Cindysan’s grip I walked back along the glowing beach with the two, the blonde following close behind us.

“But, the lab has air conditioning, and free food!”

She and Ika Musume bickered a little bit while we walked, but I kept out of it. I figured I shouldn’t outright reject the offer in case this Chizuru-nee-chan – who was probably the same Chizuru that Ika Musume referred to earlier, judging by Takeru’s use of the “nee-chan” suffix to refer to others (maybe he had some kind of lower social standing?) – said I couldn’t stay in the beach house. The night environment may have turned out dangerous to sleep in.

By the time we made it back it was nearly dark, the planet’s sun having completed its journey below the sea and leaving a final flicker of orange light in its wake. I wondered how long nights were in this system, forgetting the briefing we’d all received the other day.

Takeru and Ika Musume were greeted by Eikoneechan – or, just Eiko, I supposed – and Aneki. Ayumisan and the other short-haired girl had both left, it seemed, leaving just the pair to tend to the handful of lingering customers.

“Where have you been, Ika Musume? We got busy!” Eiko barked. I sensed she was more worried than angry.

Ika Musume did not. “RC-323 was just showing me his fighter! You’re only mad because you didn’t get to see it, de geso!”

Like with Gorou earlier, sparks flew between the two before Aneki broke them up. “Now, now, There’s no use getting angry. She’s back safe and that’s what matters, right?” They persisted for a moment before she gave them a glare, and I realized that up until that point I hadn’t seen her with her eyes open, which changed her aura in a snap from cheerful to fearful. I took a step back at the sight.

The other two, cowed, took a seat. Takeru started to explain my situation to Aneki, who I guessed would pass it along to Chizuru before the blue-haired girl nodded. “Sure, that’s fine. We can set up the futon Ika Musume used the time she stayed here.”

“Are you sure, Aneki? He could be trouble.” Eiko seemed to like talking about me right in front of me. I took at as a kind of innocence, and it didn’t bother me much even if she meant it. I thought, I wouldn’t be so eager to have someone dressed like me stay the night at my beach house.

Aneki didn’t seem to think there was any potential danger. She was right, of course – I had no intention of doing these people any harm at all – but I wondered why she was so confident about her impression of me. Takeru nodded along with her affirmation that it would be fine.

“323-niichan is nice, Eiko-neechn!” Perhaps ‘niichan’ and ‘neechn’ have similar deferential meanings, I thought, and then tried to remember to tell Takeru he needn’t so show much respect. In a way, it made me uncomfortable, being that my rank carried no privileges.

“He is, de geso!” It was strange to have civilians, especially non-humans, vouch for me. Usually locals did their best to keep us as far away as possible if they weren’t outright hostile. Probably rightly so, given some of the stories I’ve heard and things I’ve seen, and done. Finally, Eiko acquiesced, though from Aneki’s disposition it seemed she had little say in the matter anyway.

“Alright, but I think Ika Musume should stay with him since they’re such good buddies.” The squid, as she called herself, offered no objections. Rather, she looked like she was looking forward to it.

Cindy finally spoke up, getting everyone’s attention after staying silent for a while. “Well, I can’t force him to come back with me. But I’ll let Clark, Harris and Martin know about the fighter and we’ll start working on it in the morning.”

I bowed again, trying not to aggravate customs, but from the reaction I got I sensed I did something out of place anyway. “Thank you, Cindy,” I spoke into the translator.

She waved to me and the others and walked past the beach house in the opposite direction from where we came – I assumed this was where her lab was located. Part of me *did* want to see what they were capable of since I didn’t want to waste their time trying to repair technology they didn’t understand, but I thought better of it.

Aneki prepared us something to eat, and the group – Eiko, Aneki, Takeru, Ika Musume and myself – ate together. I couldn’t understand a word they were saying as I ate, since the translator was embedded in my helmet, so I just nodded along, tried not to say much and hoped I didn’t miss anything important. For the most part the others were silent. Eiko expressed some relief to see that I was a human under the mask, I think.

They started to leave after cleaning up. I put my helmet on so I could understand Ika Musume since she was staying at Lemon with me. I also wanted to thank Aneki for the dinner.

“Oh, you can call me Chizuru,” she said. “Aneki is just what Eiko calls me.” I was a little embarrassed at the faux pas. Siblings on this planet must have special ways of referring to one another here. The three siblings headed back to their home, Takeru waving at me and Ika Musume.



Ika Musume and I were alone in the dark beach house, the stars dancing on the ocean's surface while a faint night breeze tossed the waves toward us. She was unusually quiet as we watched the water, and I saw a strange sadness in her eyes.

"Is something wrong?"

She thought about my question, then shook her head no. "I'm just thinking about how I can do more to protect the sea, de geso."

"Why do you need to protect the sea?" She'd mentioned it before but I didn't ask her to elaborate then, more concerned with finding the TIE crash.

"Didn't I say something before? I'm here from the sea as its messenger. The humans have polluted my home, so I'm invading the surface to protect it from them."

"I see. And how is the invasion going?"

"Well, so far I've invaded this beach house, and it's my home base. But I put a hole in the wall and the Aizawas are making me work here to pay it off, de geso."

"If you have that kind of power, why work for them?"

"I thought that at first, too, but Chizuru is too strong, de geso."

"She didn't seem that tough to me."

"You haven't seen her in action, de geso..."

I remembered that her glare intimidated even me, so I didn't press the issue. "Well, I hope you can make some more progress, even without my help." As soon as I said that, I wondered why.

We sat in silence again after that. I thought about what she might be contemplating. I didn't take her to be one for philosophy, and really, I wasn't either, but sometimes I catch myself thinking about things longer than I should bother.

I didn't want to break the silence, though, so I just let her think, her chin resting against her hands as she leaned over the half-wall of the beach house. I watched the tide lap at the beach for a while before she spoke up again.

"So, what is it that Stormtroopers do, de geso?"

"I'm a soldier for the Galactic Empire. We try to keep the peace on different planets throughout the galaxy. I'm surprised your planet's people have never heard of us."

"Cindy and the Three Stooges," she started, and I realized with some anxiety who the three men Cindy mentioned earlier must have been, "talk all the time about aliens and galaxies and stuff like that, but they haven't gotten any visitors until today, de geso. But they've never been able to prove aliens exist, de geso. They keep saying that *I'm* an alien! Can you believe that?!"

Yes. "No."

"Right, de geso? Isn't it plain to see I'm a normal squid?"

"Anyway, that's pretty much the gist of it. I thought, when I joined, that I would be able to protect my home. It turned out that joining up wasn't what I had hoped for."

"I know how you feel, de geso." I guessed she did. I realized, saying it aloud, that I saw something of myself in her. A younger, more idealistic me, who hadn't given up on his dream just yet. Maybe that was why I was telling her so much. Maybe I just felt safe on this planet, in spite of the circumstances...or because of them.

Ika Musume turned around, looking away from the sea for the first time since we were alone. "You should get some rest, de geso. Haven't you had a long day?"

She had a point. I walked with her to the beach house's 'kitchen,' a small room with a table on which Chizuru prepared the day's food ahead of time. There was some, but not much, room to lay out the futons that Ika Musume and I would be sleeping on. They weren't terribly soft, especially on the wooden floor, but I could think of worst conditions to spend the night in.

I lied on the futon in my armor, trying to stretch out my fatigued muscles. It was totally comfortless like this, but it wasn't *uncomfortable*, either. Ika Musume said goodnight, then fell onto her pillow asleep. Soon after changing out of my armor to get more comfortable, I did too.



The next morning, other than a few seabirds squawking, the beach was silent. I figured Ika Musume wouldn't be interested in getting up on military time, so I let her rest in her futon while I put mine away and stepped out into the sun, still wearing no armor. As I expected, the area surrounding the beach house was empty this early – the sunrise had only just begun to play on the surface of the water, turning it from black to blue, though the planet's moon still reflected on it.

Someone approached me from outside my periphery and seemed distressed. I couldn't understand what she was saying without my helmet, but judging from her demeanor she thought I was doing something wrong. She was dressed in all blue, with a matching hat, and she was wearing a weapon of some kind – by my estimation, a projectile launcher of some stripe. Primitive, but deadly nonetheless, so I thought it best to stay in her good graces.

She didn't seem to understand that I didn't understand her, so I didn't make any sudden movements. She pulled out a notepad to try and write to me – maybe she thought I could understand written language, but not spoken...or maybe she could write Aurebesh, but not speak Basic?

Ika Musume didn't afford her time to finish the note, approaching noisily and waving off the woman. She kept gesturing to me, and I took the chance to creep away slowly to get my helmet, at least, even if I'd look a little silly wearing just it and the form-fitting underclothes of my armor. The woman kept an eye on me but didn't draw her weapon or appear to grow further agitated, so I assumed Ika Musume's vouching for me was effective.

I retrieved my helmet and pulled it on, and caught the tail-end of Ika Musume's sentence.

"...so there's no need to arrest him, de geso!"

Oh, she was a policewoman. Maybe she worked for the empire in some capacity...but probably not, outfitted the way she was and given Ika Musume's earlier ignorance of the emperor and Stormtroopers. Her badge didn't recall to mind any imperial insignia I was aware of, either, so she was most likely just local law enforcement.

They kept chatting for a bit so I went ahead and donned the rest of my armor, still smoke-stained from the crash yesterday. When I was walking out, the policewoman introduced herself to me with a bow and an apology.

"No, there's no need for that. I was a stranger, after all. You did the right thing."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"He can't understand Japanese without his helmet, de geso."

She'd noticed, then. I wasn't sure why the people here called their language Japanese, but plenty of things about this planet were out of the ordinary.

As Officer Furukawa continued to apologize for her assumption, the beach house was approached by four more unfamiliar faces. They looked about the same age as Ika Musume, and she seemed excited to see them.

"If it isn't the Invasion Club! What a nice surprise, de geso! I thought you'd have school this early!" She waved to them enthusiastically.

"We got school off today, Ika-chan," spoke one of the girls, a brown-haired girl with glasses. They all wore matching white shirts with writing that my helmet translated to "invasion club" on them. "We thought we could take the day off to invade the shrine nearby, but...who is this?" She pointed to me with some trepidation.

"I'm-"

"I'm glad you asked, Kiyomi! This is RC-323, an imperial Stormtrooper! He's going to help us invade!" The girls looked at me with merited concern.

"Ika-chan, I don't think he's young enough to join a middle-school club." My age was one of the least important factors here.

"But he's got a cool ship, and he'll use it for the invasion, de geso," insisted Ika Musume.

“No, it’s alright,” I said. “I need to work on my ship today, anyway. Cindysan is probably already over there.”

“We’ll come with you, de geso!” She gestured for her four friends to come with us.

To my surprise, they didn’t protest further. They seemed to trust Ika Musume a lot – which made sense, since she was ostensibly the leader of their club. We walked the long walk back to the crash site, with Officer Furukawa offering to stay behind to explain our absence to Chizuru and Eiko when they returned.

The four girls talked freely about their days and what they were doing later in the week with Ika Musume while they walked ahead of me. The beach was just beginning to get some visitors besides us as we approached the TIE. A group of children performed some kind of ritual led by an adult where they stretched and posed along with instructions from a radio.

We arrived at the crash site to find Cindy and three men in white coats standing proudly next to my fighter which, to my surprise, had been fully reconstructed. All the missing pieces, at least on the exterior, were back where they belonged and the emperor’s enforcer stood proudly on the white sand, the sun glistening off the replaced cockpit window. A handful of drones buzzed around it.

She waved me over when she saw the six of us approaching. “I was wondering when you were going to make it out here. I was expecting to get started later, but Clark, Martin, and Harris were so excited when I told them what had happened that they worked on it through the night.” She pointed them out as she named them.

The three men did look weary, sweat pouring down their faces, but their smiles shined through with pride in their achievement. Harris, who had darker skin than anyone I’d seen on the planet to this point, spoke up first: “Don’t just thank us – thank the drones! They’re putting on the finishing touches now.” He pointed them out – they resembled old republic LAAT gunships.

Then Clark, the oldest of the three, said, “It was a lot of fun figuring out which pieces go where, but the real fun didn’t start until we added in our upgrades!”

“Upgrades?” Under my helmet I raised an eyebrow, surprised that a people I’d thought to be pretty primitive up to this point could upgrade a TIE. I worried a little that their ‘upgrade’ would be a downgrade in the end. “Like what?”

Martin, the fattest, answered: “We added some great new features! Look!” He pressed a button on the remote control in his hand. The TIE started to hover despite its empty cockpit. “Autopilot! And that’s not even the best part!”

The three crowded around the same remote now, and one of them pressed another button which produced two great metal arms from the TIE’s sides, and a pair of robot legs beneath it. All four limbs had hinges in the same places a human’s would. “Now it has a mecha mode!” They said in unison, hitting various buttons of uncertain purpose. The TIE moved its limbs slowly and robotically up and down, taking a loud step forward. Though it was nice to look at, I wondered about its ability to serve its intended function as a starfighter.

“And how does that affect its weight-” I was cut off by noisy sparks firing from the TIE’s new joints, sending small jolts in all directions,

“Uh...” the three looked at the remote, which was also sparking, scratching their heads.

“What did you do?!” cried Cindy, rushing over. The TIE began lumbering toward them.

“We’re trying to turn off the autopilot,” said Clark, “but the remote is acting up!”

“Quick,” said Cindy, “use the drones to-”

“The drones use the same remote!” yelled Martin.

“What?!” shouted everyone but the three scientists in unison. Looking up, I saw the four drones buzzing around indeterminably. One swooped dangerously close to Kiyomi and her friends. Ika Musume’s eyes narrowed, and in a flash she tore the machine in two with a pair of her tentacles.

The TIE-mech lurched toward the three baffled engineers, swinging its shimmering metal arm at them but narrowly missing thanks to Cindy shoving them out of the way. As its fist loudly struck the

beach a tremor stirred the ground, blasting sand in all directions and burying its intended targets. I drew my blaster and fired at another drone, this one diving toward me with more than accidental intent. Thankfully, it wasn't a combat machine like the TIE and went down in a single shot.

Ika Musume used her tentacles, which had surprising range, to crush the other two drones, gritting her teeth. "You three idiots! Turn the robots off, de geso!"

"We're trying," they said simultaneously. "It's not reacting to the remote at all!" I assumed they were frantically pressing buttons under the sand.

The TIE-mech turned toward Ika Musume, the empty cockpit window staring soullessly into her eyes. I tried to draw its attention with some blaster bolts but they bounced off harmlessly, the armor too powerful for my pistol to penetrate. I checked my belt for thermal detonators, where I found one – but no chance to throw it yet as it was still too close to the scientists.

The metal beast lurched toward its new target. It wasn't terribly quick, but it was fast enough to take us by surprise. Acting on her feet, Ika Musume used the bit of time she had to carry her friends to safety with her tentacles, though their weight forced her to stay in place as an anchor. It slowed down to watch her movement, probably expecting an attack, and I took the chance to lob the detonator.

It took less than a second to blow after landing at the TIE's feet, throwing up sand and fire as the explosive crash rang in my ears. The dust flying in the air obscured my vision, but I could see Ika Musume's silhouette, unharmed – the detonator had stopped the TIE's attack for now. Her friends and the scientists were well out of range, too, but they still coughed from the dust in the air.

A gust of wind tore away the sandy veil, revealing the TIE-mech...mostly unharmed, save for some cosmetic damage to the armor and some black burn marks. Normally a TIE wouldn't be able to withstand that much damage...

"What kind of armor did you put on it?!" I yelled at the stooges, who were still fumbling uselessly with the controls. The mech began to move in on Ika Musume again, rearing an arm back for another punch as it charged. The shadow of the TIE loomed long toward her, blocking out the sun.

I ran as quick as I could, making a beeline for the girl as she braced for impact. The TIE swung its fist, a metal groan accompanying the attack. I dove.

There was an impact, but it was much softer than I expected – despite my fears that I wouldn't make it, I managed to tackle Ika Musume to safety without taking the hit myself. I looked down to see if she was safe, locking eyes with her just before the TIE's fist impacted the ground again, whipping up more sand and blocking my vision. I could hear, though, and I knew from the sound of whirring gears that another fist was coming our way. I tried to position myself to block the attack and protect Ika Musume...but I was never hit.

From the direction of the TIE, there was a quick slicing sound, then some sparks. The mech went silent, and as the dust settled I saw it standing totally still with its fist raised above us, just inches from impact. Behind it stood a familiar figure clad in yellow. I managed to get to my feet, helping Ika Musume to her own with an outstretched hand.

The TIE creaked like an old bridge for a moment. Sparks and embers flew from the center of its chassis. Then, as suddenly as it sprouted arms, it fell in two pieces, split down the middle with clean, surgical precision. The two halves struck the sand at the same time, metal pieces grinding and crashing against each other with a clamor. Between the halves, which sputtered electrically, stood Chizuru, the blue-haired sister.

"Ika Musume!" called Eiko from behind us between labored breaths. "Are you alright?!"

Ika Musume turned to her caller. "When did you guys get here, de geso?!"

"Officer Furukawa told us you were going to the crash site with 323-san. We came to bring you back since you were *supposed* to be working today, but when we got about halfway here we heard a crash. Aneki started running after that."

"We're fine, de geso," started Ika Musume, "thanks to me and RC-323!"

“Yeah, you saved us,” called Kiyomi as she ran toward us. She and her friends bowed at me. “We’re sorry we called you suspicious, onii-san! Thank you for helping Ika-chan!”

“Oh, I...it’s no problem,” I began, rubbing the back of my helmet. I’d never been thanked so openly before for my work.

Chizuru was scolding Cindy and the three stooges about ‘always doing this sort of thing,’ and ‘causing trouble,’ the four prostrating with their foreheads to the ground.

After giving them a thorough lecture, she turned to the TIE, then me. Her serious, scary-looking face faded into concern. “I’m sorry! I should have been more careful! Now it’ll have to be fixed again!” She bowed to me.

The TIE...it was probably unsalvageable. I gave it a once-over. Even the guns were split down the middle – only then did I realize, thankfully, that the autopilot didn’t fire on us. The blame would have fallen on me if the TIE had managed to cause any real harm besides stirring up some sand. Still, it was a shame to see it wrecked again...I was almost glad to see it fixed.

Almost...I wondered why I was only *almost* glad. Shouldn’t I have been happy to leave this planet I’d been marooned on? Back on the Star Destroyer I called home?

I looked from Chizuru to Eiko, to Cindy and the stooges, to the Invasion Club, and to Ika Musume herself...

“It’s okay. I don’t think I can fix it like this.”

“But then...” started Cindy.

“I’ll have to stay here.” Takeru, who arrived with his sisters, and Ika Musume’s eyes lit up. “If that’s okay.”

“Of course it’s okay, de geso!” She looked pleadingly to Eiko and Chizuru. “Right?”

“Well...” started Eiko.

“It’s fine,” said Chizuru. “He can stay at Lemon until he can find a home.”

Ika Musume cheered. “Now that you’re here full-time, we can get started on the invasion for real, de geso!” She put her hands on her hips. “Welcome, the first new member of the invasion club!”



Cindy and the stooges offered, or perhaps Chizuru convinced them, to clean up the mess while the rest of us walked back toward Lemon. There was some talk about what I could do for work, and it was decided I would be a waiter like Ika Musume and Ayumi. I wondered how the customers would react to a Stormtrooper serving them...I wondered how my superior officers would react to me waiting tables. I laughed at the thought.

As we got closer, Ika Musume and I began to lag behind.

“Um...” she started, looking at her feet.

I turned toward her.

“Well...” she looked to me, then away again. “I just wanted to say thanks, de geso. For saving me.” Her cheeks were flushed.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” I said without thinking.

She smiled at me. “I’m glad, too, de geso.”

The two of us walked side-by-side as I headed toward my new life.

## Afterword

This story just happened. I went into this challenge with an idea, but that idea turned out kind of flat – I tried to expand on it and it ended up not being very fun to write. Whether it would have turned out fun to read I can't say. I changed gears entirely a couple of times, but never got into a “groove” while writing until I started writing this on a complete whim with no expectations. Funny how that works, huh?

This is actually, weirdly enough, a scenario I'd considered in my head a number of times with relation to these two stories. It turned out pretty fun to create something concrete with it, which is how I managed to write in two weeks more than I'd written all the rest of the challenge time.

It's not perfect and I don't have a lot of time to edit it, but I hope anon enjoyed it anyway. As always, thanks for reading and I hope to share something with you all again soon.

Anon