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A ROTTED BOUQUET AND A SILVER WEDDING RING

By Dawson Goodell

Dear Amy,

I've missed you. I've wanted to send you a letter for so long, but this war keeps me out of communication range. I'd be lying if I said, "Where I am is entirely safe." We've seen combat twice this week, but the risk to me personally was minimal. I will see you again. If anything can get me through this war it's my love for you.

I wish I could write more, to tell you all the things that have been going on and all the things I have been thinking, but I can't take the risk. Just know that I miss you and that I think of you all the time. Please, please, please, take care of yourself.

I love you,

Eric Bakar

"Captain Bakar."

"Yes, ensign," Eric said while looking the man over.

The man wasn't much younger than Eric in age but in aspect he was a mere child. He was still eager and still innocent. Eric's innocence was now property of the War Department and they had no

inclination to return it. The Captain was theirs now and to them he was only an asset. He had come to this position by a series of misfortunes. An officer would die and Bakar would gain a new title and a new job. If he had only stopped succeeding he may have made a niche for himself lower in the ranks. Instead, Eric Bakar had been promoted all the way up to Lieutenant Commander and left in charge of his own ship. He was now, by tradition, a Captain and he was not yet thirty.

The ensign fumbled with some papers before producing a large rolled up document. “The star charts you asked for, sir. Also, the intelligence report. The main fleet is massing at Rauri; we’re the farthest forward vessel in the sector now.”

“Thank you, ensign. Is that all?”

“Yes, sir.” The man gave a snappy salute and rushed off.

Rauri was a backwater world used primary for agricultural purposes. It had maybe a hundred million inhabitants. It had changed hands a half dozen times in the last century, usually without a fight. It had always been a convenient place to invade - nearby and hard to defend.

Dear Amy,

I haven’t heard from you in such a long time. I know, I usually wait for you to reply before I write a new letter (I never want to seem too eager to speak to you, even though I am), but I thought you’d be interested in knowing that the fleet is mustering at Rauri. We’re flying interceptor, but we’ll be recalled soon I’m sure. In just a few weeks we’ll be in orbit around your home. The closer I get to you the more being away from you hurts.

This is the last push. The war will end soon; I hope you’ll still like me when all of this is over. Lord knows I’ll still like you. Sometimes I just feel lonely. When I was an officer I could hang out in the wardroom where at least I’d have someone to talk to, but as Captain I’m expected to avoid “fraternizing”

with my subordinates. If I had to tell the truth, I don't miss them. I miss you. I miss you a lot. I would kill just to see you, even at a distance right now. It occurs to me that I don't even have a picture to remember you by. I remember well enough; every time I close my eyes I see you. Pictures never do your beauty justice.

Please write soon.

I love you,

Eric Bakar

“Captain on the bridge!”

“Thank you, ensign. How are we doing?” Captain Bakar approached the center of the bridge, staring absent mindedly into the stars before them. Lieutenant Seward, Bakar's second in command and next in seniority, stood to meet him.

“Long distance scans show nothing unusual. The code room just sent us new orders a few minutes ago. We're waiting only for you to issue them.”

Seward handed Bakar a tablet computer containing the information. Bakar looked it over and without raising his head issued the orders. “Alright, men,” he snapped, “We've been recalled to Rauri so we can leave with the rest of the fleet. Set course and engage. LS3.”

“Yes sir,” the helmsman leaned forward and moved his hands over the controls. The stars turned to lines as the ship spun around and jumped into lightspeed.

Dear Amy,

I was glad to hear from you. I was beginning to think my letters weren't getting to you, or that perhaps you had forgotten all about me. I trust that everything is going well. I was afraid that the fleet in orbit was causing some panic down there.

We were recalled to Rauri. I hope I'll have a chance to land and see you, but it is doubtful. At best we may dock in a repair yard. I'll try to make arrangements to see you. I can't guarantee anything, but believe me I'll try. We'll most likely dock at Great Plains' Repair Field. If you're in the area I could possibly meet you in the nearby shopping center.

I'm sorry to hear about Mahli. I'll keep him in my prayers. You can tell him I said hi, but I doubt he remembers me. We only met briefly.

Good luck with the job search. I'm a little surprised that you left the factory, but you're right. It was a dead end.

I love you, as always,

Eric Bakar

"Lieutenant Commander Bakar, you are a pain to track down. Who are you buying those flowers for?" The voice was that of Admiral Cadwalder, Eric Bakar's commanding officer and one of the top ranking admirals in the entire navy.

Eric turned around quickly, his mind taking him to all those times he was chastised for misbehavior as a cadet. But the calm countenance of a veteran commander fought its way to the surface. He answered Cadwalder, "Oh, these are for no one in particular."

"You are violating procedure to buy them. This girl better be special."

"Yes, sir," Eric said while fighting the urge to apologize.

“That isn’t why I’m here. Command wanted to put a more experienced officer in charge of the Rubicon, but I spoke with Admiral Dion and we agree that your combat record is impressive.” Cadwalder held a small black box out to Bakar. Bakar took it slowly and opened it. “Congratulations, Captain.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Carry on.” They snappily saluted each other and the Admiral turned to make his way out of the mall. Bakar examined the golden eagle holding the cross of sacrifice that denoted the rank of captain. He smiled to himself as he replaced his oak leaf rank marker on his collar with the new pendent.

The next day Bakar was inspecting the exterior of his ship when Cadwalder returned. “Captain Bakar,” he barked, “the 11th fleet has been delayed. I’m ordering you and a few other destroyers back into interceptor duty. We need just a few more days. If Baron ships spy this fleet we’ve lost.”

“Yes, sir. I understand, sir.”

“You’re going to be outnumbered. There won’t be any reinforcements for days. This is the most dangerous assignment in the fleet right now.”

“Understood, sir.”

“When will your ship be ready?”

“The Rubicon is a tough bird. We can leave in a few hours.”

“Good. Carry on.” Bakar saluted and Cadwalder returned the gesture.

Dear Amy,

I’m sorry about last week. I tried to land at Great Plains, but it was full. I’m sorry to hear that you waited up for me. I don’t like it when you stay out that late. It makes me feel bad and I suppose I should. I stood you up. I did get to visit Rauri while we were in for repairs. I visited the local market

and saw these flowers. I thought they were beautiful and figured that beautiful things go together, so I bought them for you.

Amy, I had intended to ask in Great Plains, but I couldn't. This should give you some time to think it over. The war will be over soon and when it is will you marry me? I know it is unusual to ask in a letter, but I bought the ring even before I deployed. I want you to use the time to think it over. If you plan on saying yes, don't mention it in your letters. I'll ask again upon my return.

We can move to Tariro. I know you've always wanted to live up in the mountains and I'm making a captain's wage now so we can afford it. I know you've always wanted to have an actual dining area and a porch. We'll even be able to get a big bay window so we can look out over the canyons.

Just something I've been thinking about.

I miss you,

Eric Bakar

“Captain, we've got three Baron Ships on sensors.”

“Shields up! All hands to battle stations!” Captain Bakar stood and gazed into the view screen where three dots were growing larger.

Lieutenant Seward leaned forward and glanced to Bakar.

“‘Combat favors the bold.’ Bring weapons to bear. Attack speed,” Bakar clenched his fist as he spoke.

The ship accelerated forward as the dots grew into the familiar shapes of Baron destroyers. The shields flashed and the ship shook as enemy fire raked its side. Bakar set his jaw and waited. The

shaking got more violent as one of the officers shouted they had a hull breach on the bottom deck. Bakar grimaced as the approaching ships grew to fill most of the screen.

“Fire at will! Take evasive action!” At Bakar’s command the ship spun around. The guns hissed as they let loose volley after volley. The closest of the ships ruptured into a fireball. The second ship rolled away from the incoming shots. The Rubicon continued a long “S” motion. The third ship came into view filling the entire screen.

“Hard port!” Bakar screamed, but the ship had already fired. The view screen shattered as an explosion ripped into the bridge. The navigator was tossed out of his chair to crack his skull against the floor.

Seward looked over expecting Bakar to give another command, but the Captain was silent. A hollow metal rod had punched through his heart. The captain’s eyes were closed, almost peacefully. He had fallen back into his chair with his lips curled into a slight smile. He was dead before his back met the chair.

Captain’s Log March 4th 2142 P.A.

Acting Captain Lieutenant Seward now commanding the Rubicon.

Captain Bakar was killed in combat with three Baron destroyers. Bakar was one of 20 men killed. Our ship was powerless for over an hour. The Baron destroyers retreated. We destroyed one ship with a direct hit to the power core. The second ship was last seen free floating with flames over 70% of the ship. The third ship escaped to light speed with only minor damage.

We’ve been going through Captain Bakar’s things to identify any family that may need to be informed of his death. I contacted his brother, to whom most of his possessions were bequeathed. They

haven't spoken in over three years. That was Eric's nearest relative. Eric didn't leave many things. His quarters were almost entirely bare. One of his more interesting items was an old cedar chest; the key to which was on Bakar's person when he died. The chest contained hundreds of letters, a rotted bouquet, and a small silver wedding ring. The letters were written to an Amy in Bakar's handwriting, but none of them had an address. We tried to track down Bakar's lover, but we couldn't find anyone of that name based on any of the clues. We even tracked down a Mahli mentioned in the letters. Mahli is an army sergeant who fell ill a few weeks back, but he didn't know of Amy. He didn't even know of Captain Bakar. After all our investigating it appears that there is no Amy.

The musings of a lonely heart...