

I could get used to Sephi hospitality, Alethia thought to herself as the attendants corralled the guests out of the main banquet hall. Although the Keldra estate didn't come any close to the grandeur of Voraskel Palace, it was still luxurious by all but the most uncompromising standards. After a sumptuous - if overly formal - feast, it was time for drinks and mingling in the great hall. And it was finally a chance to get away from A'dartia after a night as exotic Jedi arm candy. The Vatali nobles were immensely curious about the Odanites, but few had been given any opportunity to interact with one.

"I need some air," Alethia whispered, a slender hand on A'dartia's red-trimmed shoulder. She slipped out of the crowd of guests and made a beeline for a balcony just off the main corridor.

The stars glittered across the night sky, and the moon reflected silvery light down upon her as Alethia leaned on the balcony railing. The lower atmosphere spread out below her as if painted into place with thick brush strokes. As with so many deadly things, the toxic cocktail was beautiful and enticing when observed from a distance.

"Is everything alright, Master Jedi?" a silky, feminine voice asked quietly from behind her. Alethia glanced over her shoulder to see her host, Yalisti Keldra.

"Just enjoying the night air for a moment, my lady," Alethia answered. "And I'm afraid I'm not actually a Jedi."

"Of course," Yalisti smiled, stepping out to join Archenksova at the railing. "And I suspect you're not actually A'dartia's friend, either."

Did the very public attempt to kick us out give it away? Alethia thought as she smiled warmly. "I'll win her over eventually," she answered. "Actually, I was hoping to enlist your help with that."

Yalisti's smile faded slightly. "The deed."

"The very same."

"I bought it through a completely legal sale, with my own money. Lady Etlina should try it sometime."

"Of course," Alethia agreed with a wave of her hand. "I wouldn't presume to lecture a Vatali noble on her own laws. I assume you've already considered how indebted to you she would be if you returned it to her?"

"The only thing I want from that crimson harlot is to know that I have what she wants," Yalisti growled, the previous warmth now completely gone from her lovely features.

"Ah," Alethia answered. "I don't care to pry into your past with Lady Etlina, but have you considered your options? She *will* take the deed back, one way or another." Alethia raised an arm and pointed a gloved finger off into the night. "There's a plateau suitable for a landing craft half a kilometer over there. A few men in repulsor packs could make it from there to any of your, oh, thirty-two balconies." She leaned around, resting her palms on the railing and looking absently back into the estate. "And insides, well, I hate to say it Lady Keldra, but your security is laughable."

"So, what? You'll beat me up and take it?" Yalisti scowled.

"*Someone* will. Too many people owe A'dartia too many favors for you to hold it for long. But," Alethia cut off the Sephi's response, "If all you want to do is make her squirm a bit, I can certainly arrange that."

"I'm listening."

"If we get the deed, we get A'dartia's vote in the next Conclave. Naturally, she assumed you won't give it to us and we'd have to steal it. If we do that, it opens us up to certain allegations."

"And what do you want to do instead?"

"I want you to come to the Conclave. I want you to testify that Odan-Urr arranged an entente between you and A'dartia. That we convinced her to come to you with an honest and open heart and seek forgiveness for the bad blood between you. And I want you to tell the entire Conclave that, at our suggestion, you gave the deed back to its rightful owner of your own free will."

Keldra pondered it for a moment. It would catch A'dartia off guard, certainly. It would be a public humiliation and loss of face for her to come begging for forgiveness.

"I have to admit that I would like to see the look on her face when I say that in front of the Empress."

"So we have a deal?"

"Do I have a choice?" Yalisti asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Always. You just might not like your options."

The Sephi noble sighed, then nodded. "I'll have one of my people fetch the deed."

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Lady Keldra. Aalee?"

On cue, the Togruta slipped out from the shadows at the edge of the balcony, deed in hand.
"Here you are, Major."

"Thank you, darling. I'll retrieve Lady Etlina and meet you out front." Alethia turned to Yalisti, savoring the mixture of horror and admiration on her face. "Lady Keldra," she said with a courtsey, before turning to saunter back into the corridor. "I look forward to see you at the Conclave."