

NSD Preeminence

I lie in the bed reading the file that I'd just received from an unknown source, but with the highest authority, that included particulars of a certain high value target. I was tasked with eliminating this target, nothing new but there was a wrinkle. The death was supposed to look like an accident, no lightsaber wounds or blaster bolts through the forehead. The best course of action would be for me to secure the confidence of my target and encourage them to have a fall into an exposed hyperdrive reactor, or perhaps a completely random and unavoidable airlock malfunction. The scenarios I went through in my head were numerous and if I played the situation correctly I could have multiple opportunities to facilitate an untimely accidental death.

I stood and tossed the datapad to the bed. It bounced from the mattress to the other side of the bed and clattered to the floor. An exasperated sigh protruded from between my lips as I shook my head and headed to the sanisteam for a quick wash and some thinking time. Like most folks I do my best thinking while bathing, I'm not sure why but I'm sure it has something to do with the sensation of water. After I was sufficiently cleaned I stepped out of the sanisteam and took in my appearance in the mirror. Even though I was nearly forty three years old I'd done a decent job of keeping myself in shape more as a consequence of my vocation rather than an avocation to be attractive. I did possess more than a few lines on my face mostly under my eyes and around my mouth. They could be easily hidden if I were to use a combination of cosmetics and my own Force abilities. There were dozens of Sith from antiquity to modern times who had done the same. It was a lot of effort all for the sake of vanity, however on occasion I did find it worthwhile. Though this wouldn't be one of those times.

I scanned the rest of my body in the mirror and overall was pleased with what I saw. I seriously doubted that I'd be asked to pose for an issue of *Kinky Kiffar* but more than one being had found me attractive recently. My chest wasn't of the extreme size that is so popular in the holovids but they were rather perky and well formed, a few stretch marks but other than that they were holding up alright. My stomach, while reasonably flat, still bore faded stretch marks from my ill planned pregnancy a number of years ago. I'd given the child away but he'd left his mark. The shadow of my obliques and abdominal muscles hid them well. I was particularly proud of my legs and arms. I'd put a lot of time recently into defining those particular areas. Plagueis was much more martial than I'd expected and I wanted to portray a strong outward appearance of physical strength. I wasn't nearly as physically dominant as the others but I could hold my own. In truth I attempted to avoid a stand up fight. I preferred to strike unseen and then leave the same way. I gave my body and approving nod and took in a deep breath. Of course there are things I would change about myself, who doesn't look in a mirror and wish they were intergalactic fashion model Jariya Arnor? Perfect figure, toned arms and stomach, perfectly sized breasts and curves in exactly all the right places. I'd accepted that I wasn't going to look that way and that I could live with that, but can't a girl dream?

I pulled on my underwear, a pair of compression briefs and a bra of the same material, pulled a black tank top on over that, and finished the ensemble by pulling a dark grey jumpsuit on,

leaving it unzipped above my belly button while tying the sleeves around my waist. I returned to the mirror and applied a very conservative layer of concealer to the trouble areas of my face. Not so much where my lines would be completely obscured but enough that they wouldn't be immediately noticeable to the passive observer. My hair had grown a bit longer than I generally prefer recently, reaching to nearly the middle of my back. I usually kept it on the long side but this was a bit too much, I'd need to get an appointment with Rubio soon to give my dark hair some shape and a bit of a color touch up as I was able to see more grey growing through every day. I ran my fingers through it and then gathered it up in my left hand and wrapped a band around it into a loose tail that hung down over my right shoulder. I had to admit I liked this look. It was casual but also attractive in a sort of athletic way, not all the hairs made it into the tail so there were still a few strands hanging loose or falling around the side of my face. I don't know why but I felt like it just worked for a lot of different situations.

I walked to the other side of my bed and collected my datapad and tucked it into a large pocket on my left hip. Then I removed a belt from a hook on the wall and looped it around my hips below where the sleeves of the jumpsuit were tied. The belt had a few items already tucked in various pockets and holsters. I had a comlink, a hydro spanner, a collapsable stun baton, various other tools and a tiny hold-out blaster made to look like an auto-hammer. In a small pouch reserved for screws, bolts, and the like was a small vial of Synox made to look like a bolt. I always kept an emergency dose on me if I was ever in a situation where I was captured. I removed my lightsaber from its charging port on top of my desk and slid it into a concealed sleeve sewn into the right pocket of the jumpsuit. With minimal effort I could rip the pocket out of the pants and have my lightsaber activated in less than a second. After ensuring that I was ready both physically and mentally I pulled my comlink out and thumbed a frequency. "Quaestor, this is Va'nia Drelik, I wonder if you had a minute to spare for me?" I transmitted attempting to use the most nonchalant voice I could muster. It only took a moment to receive a reply.

"Of course. Can you meet me in the mess on deck four?" came the reply from Taranae Rhode, Quaestor of House Karness Muur, my target.

"I will be there in a few minutes." Was my reply as I closed the channel and made my way to the nearest turbolift to get to deck four. I had only interacted with Rhode once before, when I first came to be a part of Plagueis. She was rollmaster then and was tasked with assigning all of the new members. I was an edge case as I wasn't fresh from the Shadow Academy but rather had been personally assigned to the Dark Council for a number of years before becoming a rank and file member of the Dark Brotherhood. I had bucked the assignment at first as I felt my skills were wasted doing a long term infiltration but in the last few months it had grown on me. I'd gathered a good bit of intel, but this would be the first time I'd actually been tasked with taking action against the clan. I was thrilled to be doing what I was best at again. From what I'd learned about Taranae, she seemed to be an open personality with those she could trust so I'd just have to get her to let her guard down and then take whatever action I felt would give the best result. If someone wanted her out of the way this was probably the most effective way as Plagueis kept

moving at all times. The doors slid open on deck four. I stepped out of the lift, checked the directory, and located the mess hall.

I stepped into the mess. It was reasonably quiet as it was nearly 22:30 ship time only the night owls were still awake at this time. Aside from myself and Taranae, who I spotted at a small table glancing out of a viewport, the mess was only occupied by only a few crewmen who didn't even look up from their conversation when I entered. I made my way up to the line and took a small cup of what I assumed from the smell was Ansionian tea. I also selected a bowl of mixed fruits that I tentatively identified as Ishi-Tib cracked coconut, juma fruit, manta pear, and a bright green melon that she didn't recognize at sight. I collected them on a small tray along with a spoon and walked over to where Tarane was seated. "This seat taken?" I asked with a friendly tone. The red headed woman looked up at me and gave a tired smile while indicating the chair across from her. I sat and gently laid my tray down on the table between us.

"So how can I help you?" She asked taking a sip from a cup of what appeared to be caf. Knowing she was tired would be an advantage for me.

"Well it has been a while since I was assigned here and we've been occupied so much of that time that we haven't had a chance to connect at all and to be honest," I pause to take a sip from my cup and glance out of the viewport with a mixed expression of sadness and disappointment, "I just don't feel that I'm fitting in or making an impact here. I'm just not used to that." I say with a trace of a catch in my throat as I spoon a piece of the mysterious green melon into my mouth. I still don't know what it is but I like it.

"I understand what you mean. I still don't think I fit in here either." She replies in a very understanding tone.

"What do you mean?" I ask softly looking up at her removing my face from my hands.

"Well this position left me with some rather large shoes to fill. Before me was Eiko, who is a tactical genius who could analyze any situation and come up with a solution to any problem. Before him was Callus Bo'amar who served as Quaestor for a very extended term and he was a huge presence who could just use his stubborn bullheadedness and his strength to make anything that he wanted to happen without issue." She stopped to take another drink from her cup, "I don't have anything that those two had. I tried my best to learn from them but I just don't have their natural skill sets. Things that came easy to them I have to work at. I'm more of an organizer, not really much of a leader."

"I disagree, you're much more than a manager or organizer. You just approach situations from a different angle. You've got a different perspective than either of those Quaestor's did. It will probably make you a better leader in the long run." I say looking up at her. Taranae's eyes are a striking shade of green that stands out in stark contrast to her pale skin. Her hair is a violent shade of red that accentuates her pale skin even more, she is wearing it in a loose bun very

similar to my own. Taranae is a young woman but the pressure of leadership is starting to show on her face, especially in her eyes. There is a bit of sadness in those eyes but also life and a desire to be great.

“You’re kind for saying that, especially since you’ve not been with us very long.” She said with a true smile on her face as she took another sip from her cup.

“Oh,” I say doing my best to sound like she caught me off guard, and to some extent she did, “I didn’t mean to sound like I’m trying to butter you up.”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that,” she replied raising her hands, “just that you haven’t gotten to see a lot of what we actually do.”

“Well it has been hectic lately. But I’ve always felt like you had a good grasp of what was going on and communicated it well with us.”

“Even though it seems as if the Dread Lord keeps pulling you away for his own tasks.” She said raising an inquisitive eyebrow even though no question was stated.

“Yes, well I have a very particular set of skills that are in high demand.” I reply and make myself blush.

“I’d really like to see those skills myself one day.” She said making sustained eye contact that I almost broke.

“Hopefully soon.” I say meeting her eyes and holding them. A long moment passed and she broke her eyes away. It had been a fairly intense moment and I felt redness along my neck, shoulders, and chest. I could see that Taranae had the same reaction, and it was much more pronounced on her porcelain skin. I place my left hand on the table as I put another piece of fruit in my mouth and close my eyes to enhance the taste.

“I should have gotten some of that.” Taranae said as she glanced over her shoulder to see the lights in the serving line dim. I let a small grin crease the corners of my mouth and push the bowl toward her.

“There’s too much here for me,” I say indicating the bowl, “please help yourself.” I put a ripe piece of manta pear in my mouth and sigh as I enjoy the delicate flavor.

“I don’t have a spoon.” Taranae says longingly looking at the fruit before her.

“You don’t need one,” I chuckle as I lift my right hand and extend my influence of the Force to a piece of the Ishi-Tib coconut and lift it towards her mouth. She plucks it out of the air with a wide smile on her face that only further deepens the lines on her face, though it does make her look

younger and more attractive. “You don’t just use the Force for fighting do you?” I ask as I make a piece of the juma fruit do loops into my open mouth.

“My master had a very reverant view on the Force, that we shouldn’t use it for mundane things.” She said as she levitated a piece of the mystery green melon to her mouth.

“Sounds like a boring guy.” I say with a grin, “Though I guess depending on how you grew up it would change how you see things. I came late the the Force so I’m all about using it as often as I can, to make up for lost time or something.” Taranae laughs at that as she opens up and tells me about her upbringing and how she got to be where she is today.

“Wow,” I say in a low tone, “I would never have guessed you came through all that. That explains why you are so strong now.”

“I don’t know if I’m strong or not. Though I will say it’s been good to talk to someone about it. Haven’t got many here in this house who can sympathize with me on a personal level.”

“I know what you mean. Thank you for taking the time to sit down with me tonight, I know you’ve got a lot of other obligations.” I take my datapad from my pocket and check the time there and am shocked when I see the chronometer, “It’s 03:27.” I shake my head and look up at Taranae who has thrown her head back and is rubbing her face with both hands. I stand and stretch my arms above my head. I reach down and pick up both of our cups from the small table and head over to the caf dispenser. I discretely put the small amount of Synox into Taranae’s cup and then fill it with caf and do the same to mine, sans poison of course. I return to the table and place the cup down on the table and take a sip from mine. Taranae looks up at me with an exhausted smile.

“Thanks.” She replies as she unties her long red hair and runs her fingers through it as it drops down in a crimson cascade down her back. It truly was a shame such a beautiful woman had to die, unfortunately I didn’t make the rules and it was past time for me to make my exit. I finished my cup and turned to leave but I felt Taranae stand up and put her hand on my elbow. I turn to face her and she has a very tired but very cute smile on her lips. “You can come to me anytime you need something okay?” Our eyes met again and her grip became tighter on my elbow.

“Alright,” I say softly as I take a small step closer to her and my hand instinctively reaches out and finds her shoulder. Then we are in an embrace, a true embrace, something that I haven’t felt in years. We pull apart but I can still feel her body on mine and her scent, a slight hint of cinnamon, lingers in my nostrils. Before I can stop myself I pull her to me and place my hand on her cheek as our lips meet. She doesn’t resist and she presses herself closer to me, everything seems to fade away as I close my eyes and she’s the only thing I want. I run my hands through her scarlet hair and place my hands on the small of her back and pull her body even tighter to mine. Her hands untie my hair and slide down my back to my hips as she squeezes me tight.

We both pull away simultaneously and catch our breath and try to process what just happened. I rub my face with my hands and see Taranae reach for her cup. My heart stops beating and time seems to slow as her fingers wrap around the handle. Intellectually I know that this is a good thing, that my mission will be accomplished. However something else inside me, something more primal, was screaming at me to stop her from drinking; to stop her from dying, to stop me from being her murderer. I act almost without thinking.

"TARANAE, NO!" I scream as I shoot my hand out towards the poisoned cup and knock it from her hand. It falls to the ground and shatters dispersing its contents all over the floor. She looks from the floor to me, eyes wide expressing shock. "Something is wrong with the caf." I cough and double over holding my stomach. "I feel awful." I make a retching noise and cover my mouth. I manage to regurgitate some caf and do my best to hide it but make sure that she sees enough. I fall to my knees and cough and retch a few more times.

"Va'nia," Taranae calls out, "Let's get you to the med bay, and I'll get someone in here to clean this up." She says kneeling next to me, pulling my hair back out of my face and rubbing my back. She puts an arm under mine and helps me stand. I get up weakly and look up to her.

"I'm really okay." I say with a rasp in my voice, "Can you just help me get back to my quarters? I just need a shower and a few hours sleep. Also brush my teeth." I say with a weak smile.

"Alright." Taranae replies as I lean closer to her and she helps me to the turbolift. When we arrive at my door I shakily reach out my hand and press the access plate. The door slides open as we shuffle inside. Taranae helps me sit down on the edge of the bed as she sits down gently next to me, her arm still around my waist.

"Just so you know," I say laying back on the bed with my feet hanging off the side, "Before all the sickness I was having a really good time."

"Yeah, me too." Taranae says looking over her shoulder at me. "I was kind of worried you got sick after kissing me." She grins sheepishly and looks away. I make a small chuckling noise in my throat and reach my hand up and find hers. She squeezes it and smiles. "Listen," Taranae begins but I interrupt her.

"I know," I say as I reassuringly squeeze her hand, "I'm not looking for anything from you Taranae. Tonight just happened, neither of us was expecting it but that doesn't mean it was bad. Let's just go slow and see what happens." I smile up at her as she takes my hand and kisses it.

"You're an amazing woman Va'nia." She says kissing my hand again. "We will talk very soon. Right now you get some sleep and feel better. Let me know if you need anything." She stood up and made her way to the door. "Goodnight Va'nia." She said as the door slid open.

“Good night Taranae.” I called out to her. She turned around and looked at me from the door frame with the light from the corridor silhouetting her and highlighting the lines of her body.

“Call me Tara.” She said stepping out of the door as it slid shut.

I grabbed the pillow from the head of my bed and slammed it into my face as I screamed. I was royally screwed now. Taranae was supposed to be dead and here I am kissing her. She was even about to take herself out and I stop her! What was I thinking?! Now I didn't even know if I could kill her. I really needed to get myself sorted out and quick before I end up doing something I can't fix.