

“There it is, right where it should be,” Leeadra Halcyon stated calmly, pointing through the Voidbreaker’s transparisteel window at the pale shape of a stricken transport. Sitting idle in the void, far from any habitable planets and drifting towards a cloud of asteroids, the ship swerved slowly around its axis, testament to the lack of propulsion power.

“I don’t like it. Could be a trap,” Grot hissed, the Trandoshan’s eyes narrowing in suspicion as he observed the unarmed hauler like it was a glass of tainted wine.

“It could be,” Lucine Vasano agreed. “But we came all this way. It would be quite *unprofessional* to not see this through.” The barb, directed at the Trandoshan mercenary’s recent promotion and inclusion into the ranks proper of the Arconan elite, was thinly veiled. Grot stared at her for a moment, but did not rise to meet the slight. Something about the captain deeply unsettled him.

“Good, then bring us about. Hail the ship and scan for any lifesigns. Grot, prepare a boarding party,” Lucine’s orders flowed out with a gentle sharpness as if stating demands to a losing party.

Grot suppressed the instinctive growl at being ordered around, feeling like he was destined to be the losing party in any exchange with the red haired vixen. Opting for a nod, the Trandoshan turned around and left the bridge as Leeadra engaged the scanner and took them in closer towards the GR-75.

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“I still don’t like this,” Grot stated under his breath, his voice muffled and distorted by his helmet. Around him, the rest of the Voidbreaker away team seemed unphased by the lizard’s pessimism. They had grown to expect it.

“Duly noted, now, please do as you’re told and quit your bellyaching,” Lucine sighed as she adjusted her own outfit. Despite her displeasure of getting her hands dirty, the battleteam leader still held a sense of duty about being here with her crew. And of course, if they were to find some stranded space mariners aboard the vessel, being personally there to greet them as their savior could hold certain benefits. Especially when it came to currying favors from them later on.

Beside her, Juliana Kelrune continued to balance a vibroknife on her fingertip. She’d elected to leave Kelviin and Tali to tend to the ship along with Leeadra, the former team leader. Their particular sets of skills were far better suited to tending the ship, she figured. And having someone who could, in a pinch, contact them telepathically was a boon in her book.

The transfer shuttle clamping to the side of the transport, aligning the docking rings and cycling the atmosphere, Lucine checked her lightsaber was where it was supposed to be and ventured over to the port. Grot was already occupying most of the available space, vibrosword in one hand and slug pistol in the other, ready to breach and clear on her orders.

As much as she would have liked to see the man do his thing, the red haired Human simply laid a hand on his shoulder and tapped the door controls. Restrained by the delicate gesture, Grot merely panned the transport interior with his pistol before wading inside with the rest of the team in tow.

“Doesn’t look like much,” Juliana muttered, having clearly been expecting something more.

“Looks *can* be deceiving,” Grot stated dryly, almost earning herself some flippant counter-retort.

“Can, yes, but in many cases first impressions count for a lot,” Lucine interjected before Juliana could get herself riled up again. “Let’s just make sure there’s no-one onboard and...”

“Contact front!” Grot snapped, his armor clattering with the sudden motion as he snapped his weapons to point at the shadowy shape shambling from beneath a control console.

“P-please, don’t shoot!” the haggard man pleaded, hands wearily raised over his head. “I am unarmed.”

Grot shot a glance at Lucine, expecting orders. It was Juliana who moved first. Striding forth without a second thought, she’d crossed the distance between them and kned the man in the gut before twisting his arm into a lock behind his back. “He’s clean!” the young woman shouted to her comrades, earning a set of incredulous looks from the rest as they watched the Bothan squirm in pain.

“If he is unarmed, let him go,” Lucine sighed, stepping forward with an apologetic expression, pushing down Grot’s pistol as she passed him by. “My sincerest apologies for the rudeness of my *associate*,” Lucine greeted the crewman. “She has yet to fully learn how to act in a civilized manner.”

Growling, Juliana let go of the man, shooting a venomous glare at the redhead before heading off to clear the rest of the cramped command pod atop the GR-75. Grot chose it wise to follow.

“Quite the... associates you have,” the Bothan croaked, rubbing his arm.

“Yes, but they’re all quite useful, in their own ways,” Lucine admitted. “Now then, with the unpleasantries out of the way, may I inquire as to whom I’m conversing with?”

The Bothan took a moment to register the question before realization struck him. “Oh! Yes, of course. I am Vicks M’mooth and this old bird is the *Schlepper*. I’m afraid the poor old gal has made her last trip though. The hyperdrive got fried pretty bad. Shouldn’t have loaded so many damn crates.”

“Well, that happens. Good for you, we happened to be in the neighborhood,” Lucine replied with a smirk. “I’m sure your employer, and customers, will be more than happy to see their cargo delivered safely to its destination.”

“Oh, yes! Definitely, miss...?”

“Vasano. Now, we will have our engineer come over and fix that hyperdrive so it can reach the next inhabited planet and we can figure out the rest from there.”

“Ah, humh, well there’s a small issue with that. The hyperdrive core melted, very completely. I doubt any mechanic can fix it. Salvage, perhaps, but...”

“You haven’t seen what our Kelviin can do,” Lucine replied with a smug smirk.

“With all due respect to your, eh, Kelviin, it might be better if you instead took on the cargo from my hold and ferried it to the next planet over. The *Schlepper* can be left adrift to be salvaged, or destroyed,” Vicks insisted.

“I see,” Lucine stated with narrowed eyes, something about the Bothan’s tone rubbed her the wrong way.

“I mean, it would be the most efficient way and I would hate to see something happen to the wine.”

“The wine?”

“Yes, the wine. I am transporting fourteen hundred crates of Corellian red. Real good stuff too. Destined to some high-end buyers over on Selen.”

“Oh?” Lucine visibly perked, the myriad opportunities flowing through her mind. “It would not do to let such a precious cargo to wait, of course.”

“No, ma’am.”

“And I am equally certain that the buyers of such fine wines would be most delighted to receive their wares in full and on time.”

“Without a doubt, ma’am. I’m sure they would be most grateful for such a service. And, I am sure, my employer would not object to a crate being gifted to our savior.” Vicks handed her a cargo manifest. “If you would be inclined to browse while we wait for your ship to dock?”

The redhead’s eyes lit up upon the long list of names, each titillatingly familiar from her past and seen in the most expensive of wine charts in the finest of restaurants. There were also a number of new, exquisitely named acquaintances which she already longed to sample and get to know better. Without a second thought, she hailed Leeadra and told her to bring the Voidbreaker in close and prepare to transfer the cargo.

“Boss,” Grot’s voice crackled over the holobead in Lucine’s ear.

“Not now, Grot,” she hissed and closed the link.

“Boss, you should see this,” the Trandoshan insisted.

“I am in the middle of something,” Lucine stated, more adamantly this time as she continued to leaf through the manifest, looking for which crate might soon be hers.

“There’s a karking vibroaxe in the hyperspace core, you uptight sithspit!” Juliana’s voice cut through the ether like a knife scraping against marble. It was enough to finally rouse the woman from her greedy browsing and consider the words. A vibroaxe?

It seemed Vicks had caught the sudden shift in her mood and realized what it meant. Before the Sith could react, the Bothan had thrown himself to the floor, clutching his lapel pin - a detonator.

A high-pitched hum grew inside the transport’s hull, an alarmed transmission from Leeadra filtering through a moment before detonation, calling out a massive energy spike inside the GR-75’s cargo hold. The next moment the ion pulse mine detonated, a flickering light-blue disk of energy enveloping both ships and knocking out their power grids entirely, along with their personal electronics.

When the crackling of overloading equipment and fried circuitry subsided, the team was left dazed, but unharmed. Their comms down for the moment, Lucine could only hear the growls of displeasure from their semi-tame Trandoshan as he cursed his weak and insubordinate weaponry.

The Bothan, it seemed, was quite unphased and almost *expectant*.

“You! What did you do this for? I say the word and you will be spread extremely thin across a very wide area, courtesy of my scaled friend.”

M’mooth chuckled, totally dismissive of the threat on his life and simply gestured at the cockpit window. “I would advise against that, if I were you. Not that I’m worth much, of course, but I’m the only bargaining chip you have.”

As the comms systems recovered, Leeadra’s alarmed tone confirmed what Lucine was already looking at, a Marauder corvette had jumped in and closed in on the stricken duo of ships, guns obviously trained upon the unshielded and defenceless *Voidbreaker*.

“*Sithspit*,” the Sith cursed under her breath. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she could feel Grot’s gloating.

“Lucine, they’ve locked onto us and we cannot jump! Kelviin’s doing his best, but the systems are overloaded. We can’t as much as turn our guns at them!” Leeadra cried out in alarm, her voice distorted by the surges of lingering ion spikes still in the ship’s systems.

Gritting her teeth, the redhead turned to glare at the Bothan with barely restrained venom. She knew when she’d been set up.

“*What* do you want?” she hissed.

“It’s not about what *I* want,” Vicks replied with a bemused laugh, pointing at the blinking light on the control screen indicating an incoming hail. “It’s what *He* wants.”

Despite her ladylike manners, Lucine felt an almost overwhelming urge to punt the furry fiend in the face. It wouldn’t accomplish anything, she knew that much, but it would make her feel much better and in the current level of *kark* she found herself in, that was already something. Begrudgingly, she nevertheless reached out and tapped the key, opening up a channel to what she assumed was the Marauder’s command bridge.

The flickering holoscreen warped and shifted until a jittering image of a snouted face formed upon it, projected a few inches off the console. The pale blue picture failed to capture much of his detail, but Lucine could tell that the person she was addressing was a male, the stubby beard on his bloated chin obvious evidence of his gender.

“Captaain Vasaano,” the Toydarian greeted her, his words drawn out and as greasy as his snout. “I hope you appreciaate the trouble I’ve gone through to arrrange this meeting.”

“I see you’ve spared no expense, though I do also respond to appointments made with my secretary,” Lucine replied dryly. “However, that would require you to tell me your name, which I suppose you are not inclined to, considering...”

“Raoul Kar’Dannaa,” the Toydarian bluntly interrupted her. “I have no need to hide my name from anyone. In fact, I’m sure you’ve heard the name before.”

“You presume much.”

“Perhaps, or maybe I assumed too much of your interest in your subordinates.”

Lucine furrowed her brow.

“She never told you?” Raoul seemed amused by this revelation. “Though I suppose she wouldn’t. That little minx was good at keeping secrets. Like her true nature.”

“Who are you talking about?” Lucine demanded, her eyes narrowing as some primal instinct of maternal protection began to rear its head. Despite her interests, this was still her team and she would be damned to let some upstart *sleemo* make her look like a fool and threaten her teammates.

The Toydarian's amusement grew, as was evident by his spreading leer that by now peeked on either side of his fat snout. "I will let her tell you. I am not as heartless as she might claim. But, once she has given her farewells, it's time for her to return back to me. I loathe when my property goes missing."

The link was cut before Lucine had time to speak a further word, leaving her seething with anger at being toyed with. The leering Bothan doubled over with her fist deep in his gut, providing a measure of catharsis. As Vicks keeled over, coughing and wheezing, Lucine opened the team-wide channel on her communicator and addressed the entire battle-team.

"Someone named Raoul Kar'Dannaa claims to have lost some property. Would someone care to explain what he is on about?"

For a moment there was only static, the line silent as her tense words drove back any witty remarks. Then, a meek voice broke the electric stillness.

*"I, think ve needt to talk,"* Tali muttered.

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The Twi'lek fell silent and the comm-link was once again filled with static. In the corner, the muffled grunts of the bound and gagged Bothan disturbed the stillness until a sideways glance from Lucine sent Grot's fist into his face, knocking Vicks unconscious once again.

"So this, Raoul character," Lucine began, trying to piece together the Twi'lek's tale, "he is..."

"Was," Leeadra chimed in.

"Was your... master. Or owner."

"Yes," Tali stated in a monotone voice. "Andt now he vants me back."

"I see," the redhead mused, a silence falling over the team once again.

It lingered.

"I think it is a good deal," Grot finally broke the uncomfortable stillness. "One for the many. Pack survives."

"Grot!" Julie snapped, kicking the lizard in the shin. "We're not selling one of our own to this *sleemo!*" she growled, before turning to look at Lucine. "Right?"

The response took her a few iotas longer than Tali felt comfortable.

“Of course not, darling. But we may have to let him think we do.”

“What are you saying?” the newly-minted Knight demanded.

“She wants to use me as bait,” Tali stated over the comms. “I am ok with this.”

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“I am not ok with this,” Tali muttered as Leeadra held up a shock collar.

“I know, but that’s what he demanded. Wouldn’t be much of a slaver if he didn’t want his possessions collared.” Tali’s murderous look struck the Pantoran silent as she realized what she’d just said and meekly looked down. “I... didn’t mean it like that. Sorry.”

The Twi’lek sighed, the breath long and drawn out as it seemed she visibly deflated a little before kneeling down so the smaller woman could affix the hated device. “I know,” she muttered, pulling up her lekku to let Leeadra affix the device around her neck.

The click of the collar snapping shut brought vivid memories rushing back into the Jedi’s mind and the Pantoran next to her could see the visible change in her. She laid a soft hand upon her friend’s arm and offered an encouraging smile. “It’s only temporary, Tali. We won’t let him take you, I promise.”

Hand tugging on the unyielding metal now clenched tightly around her neck, Tali replied with a strained tone. “I hope so. You just don’t know what this *sleemo* is capable of... None of you know.”

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“Ah, I am glad to see you’ve made a sensible choice, captain Vasaano,” Raoul greeted her as the transfer shuttle’s ramp lowered onto the Marauder’s deck. The clicking and whirring of a handful of B2 super battle droids readying their weapons, alongside a cadre of mercenaries and bodyguards training their blasters and slugthrowers on the group greeted them with a grim predictability.

“And I see you are living up to your reputation, lieutenant Kar’Dannaa,” Lucine quipped, though visibly displeased by being held at various gunpoints.

“Aaah!” the Toydarian chuckled heartily, “I see that little *schutta* has spilled her beans. I hope she did not leave out too many dirty details, mmmh? And please, call me Raoul. We are among equals here.” Raoul spread his webbed arms wide, his leathery wings flapping with the sound of wet rags, keeping his bloated frame airborne by some miracle. His sickly green skin was pitted with yellow spots, marks of narcotics overuse, and his eyes were beady pools of ink that belied a keen intellect.

“And you may call me Captain Vasano,” Lucine replied dryly, “We are, after all, far from equal.”

“Ah Lucine, you offend me,” Raoul sighed, rubbing his hands submissively. “But perhaps...” he snapped his clawed fingers and the Marauder shuddered with the recoil of its turbo-lasers. Lucine could hear the screams of Leeadra over the holo-link as the Voidbreaker was raked by heavy weapons fire, melting through layers of ablative armor on its starboard side. “We can adjust your attitude. You’ll have to believe me, I am very proficient in that particular field of trade.” He held up his hand and the firing ceased, Leeadra crying out a prayer of thanks as the damage had not yet crippled anything vital.

“That won’t be necessary,” Lucine muttered, her voice strained taught like a bowstring, “Raoul.”

“Good, good!” Raoul nodded approvingly, flapping closer to her. “Now, I assume you have what is mine, or else...” His eyes roamed her figure, assessing her like a piece of meat, and a far too cheap cut for her liking. “We may have to find some *other* arrangements.”

“Touch her and you die,” Grot growled, raising his rifle at the Toydarian and racking the bolt.

“Ah, a Trandoshaan. Mmmh, such good stock. Strong, vigorous, potent,” the slaver mused, “I am sure you could fetch a high price. A gladiator, perhaps? Or...” His leer widened as the oily pits flickered with malicious fire. “They say a Trandoshaan... ahem, gentleman sausage makes for potent aphrodisiac, when dried and ground. Wonder how many one can harvest, until they stop growing back?” His eyes narrowed, nailing the Trandoshaan in place. “I’ve always wanted to know...”

The lizard shifted, discomfort at the threat well hidden, but still minutely visible as he suppressed a growl and slowly lowered his rifle.

Before the cocky slaver could speak a further word to rub in the insult, Lucine took the initiative. “Yes, we have the one you requested,” she stated, voice still tense at her hand being forced. “Tali!” she called out into the shuttle, “Please come out.”

There was a faint jingle of metal chain links as the Twi’lek walked down the ramp, thick collar wrapped around her neck hands bound by chains, an ancient lightsaber hanging from her waist. Her cheeks were red with anger and humiliation, face down in submission and lekku squirming in grief. She was exactly how the Toydarian remembered her, even if far more clothed.

“Ah, finally...” Raoul revelled, his beady eyes nailed to the meek Twi’lek about to once again become his slave. Though he had not dared to dream of such things, having a Jedi slave would make him the envy of all his peers. It would be his piece de resistance and the crown jewel of his collection of curios. Oh yes, she was about to make him a very happy man, in more ways than the obvious.

“Here, as agreed,” Lucine spat spitefully, handing over the remote to the collar.



“Excellent, excellent, just as we agreed, yes?” the Toydarian smirked, something in his tone of voice sending chills down Lucine’s spine.

Pressing the control, Tali vined, but nothing happened. Grot brought up his rifle, but the Toydarian’s tongue was quicker. It clacked a single, wet note as he tossed the useless remote from him. The security detail had their weapons trained on the Trandoshan and every other insolent cheater.

“You thought you could outsmart me?!” he growled, webbed hand finding his shock whip and drawing it from his belt. The energized tip crackled on the floor, the Toydarian’s eyes nailed into Lucine’s. The sound of the whip crackling brought memories fresh to her mind, some good, but many very bad. “I see and hear everything!” he lashed out with the whip, the charged coil cutting through the sleeve of her dress and drawing a raw howl of pain.

“I knew of your little plans the moment you laid them, you dumb little *schutta*. You’d do better than to hatch your tricks aboard My ship...”

Lucine clutched her arm, glaring at the slaver with loathing. “You *will* let us go.”

The man broke out in a chortling laugh. “Did that dumb piece of meat not tell you? Those tricks don’t work on me, only...”

He never got further than that, when the remote sparked and blew, an ion pulse knocking out the battle droids and startling the mercenaries as their optics went on the fritz. In a flurry of cacophonous motion and sound, Grot had dropped down to a knee as he fired over and over, working the bolt on his rifle like a machine as he gunned down the slaver’s bodyguard one by one.

“Aaaargh, you lying sithspit!” Raoul growled, fluttering away from the team and tapping furiously at a control band on his spindly wrist. A pair of turrets deploying from the ceiling, even as the final mercenaries returned a few hasty shots and took a slug each for their troubles, the Toydarian made his escape.

Reaching out with her hand, clenching it to a fist and *twisting* the turret out of alignment, Tali forced the automated gun to shoot wide of its mark and strike one of Raoul’s own fighters instead. The lightsaber humming in her hand, golden blade sparking as the ancient weapon struggled to remain stable, the vengeful Twi’lek glared at her former ‘master’.

“You come after me again,” she growled, “I *vill* endt you...”

The fleeing slaver did not bother with a reply, slipping behind a ray shielded barrier as the Marauder hummed with power as it trained its weapons on the Voidbreaker once more. The power surge grew, the vibrations intensifying until soon the sounds became too loud and the shaking of deck plating clearly out of the ordinary.

Outside the Marauder's hull, Kelviin and his trusty pit-droid were busy at work, tearing open panels and rerouting power to overload the guns without letting them fire. With the rest of the team distracting their foe, he'd had easy time slipping onto the enemy craft and dismantling its weapons, though the impromptu volley had left the Wookiee's fur standing on end inside his space suit.

As Leeadra bared the Voidbreaker's own teeth, the Marauder's shields flickered and flared with repeated impacts, forcing the bridge crew to pull the ship away. Floating away from the fleeing vessel, Kelviin exchanged approving hand-gestures with his pit-droid while the transit shuttle ferried the away-team back into the Voidbreaker's hangar bay.

They had barely escaped their doom, but learned a great deal. They had not seen the last of Raoul Kar'Dannaa, but next time, next time they would be ready for him.