

Not much happens in the Outer Rim.

This far out from the galactic center travelers are rare and inhabited planets are even rarer. Most systems in this desolate frontier are visited perhaps a single time by some enterprising explorer, carefully cataloged, marked on a star-map, and then swiftly forgotten about. The explorer continues on, chasing the thrill of the undiscovered once more, with hardly a thought given to the places he leaves behind. Places like Rana LIV.

It, along with its fifty-three brothers, bears the name of its discoverer Rana Edar; A young Durosian woman who set out to the frontier with big dreams and big ideas. She then swiftly ran out of those ideas when faced with the task of naming several dozen star systems. Rana LIV is particularly unremarkable for a star system, a red dwarf orbited by a few lonely balls of rock and a pitiful ring of asteroids which never quite got to be a ball of rock. Lacking utterly the sort of romantic adventure Rana had been longing for, she swiftly abandoned her namesake. Space buckled and twisted as her ship squeezed itself into hyperspace and disappeared forever from Rana LIV.

And so it was.

“Transitioning from hyperspace now captain.”

There was always a slight sense of vertigo as always as a ship transitioned back into space. The sudden change in movement and location sent the stomachs of most species rumbling, as their brain was not built to intuitively comprehend the transfer. The sensation was swiftly dismissed with a few deep breaths, and perhaps a nausea pill, as the Bridge crew of the *Voidbreaker* continued their work. Overseeing them was Lucine Vasano, captain of the *Voidbreaker*, and her two bodyguards, Decima and Grot.

“Excellent work helmsman. Sensors, how are the emissions?”

“Radiation minimal captain, ship is running ultra-quiet.”

“Lovely!” Captain Vasano clapped her hands together, a satisfied smile on her lips “Good work everyone, lay a course for the asteroid belt and prepare to change shifts. You all deserve a rest.” The redhead leaned back into her plush captain's chair, lifting a glass of wine from a tray nearby.

“Will you explain to us now how this relates to our mission, Lucine?”

“As I have explained, Decima, the details are—”

“On a need to know basis, yes, you have,” the Iktochi bodyguard bit out from behind Lucine, folding her arms and glaring at her superior, “But seeing as we are now forty-five parsecs from

any trade route, it's very clear this is more than a trade expedition. For what reason could we be needed in..." She shifted her stance and looked over to her fellow bodyguard for assistance. Grot, the towering Trandoshan on the other side of the captain's chair, gave a short glance to his datapad before snorting in amusement.

"Rana LIV."

The Iktochi nodded and gave a pointed glance back to her captain. Lucine took a sip of her wine, smiling playfully at her subordinates' frustration. Decima growled in frustration, grinding her vibroaxe into the deck plating to emphasize her point.

"Our mission is still, and always has been, to serve as a trade delegation for Clan Arcona" the redhead relented, placing her glass back on the tray and inspecting her nails.

"Trade with whom? The rocks and stones?" Grot responded sarcastically, "There is no prey to be found here."

"Precisely," Lucine gave a self-satisfied smirk and slowly stood up from her chair, "Would you two care to join me in my ready room?"

Grot and Decima shared an uneasy look. Both of them had very little interest in getting dragged into whatever scheme Lucine had cooked up, but also had very little say in the matter. Had they known about this little detour back at dock they might have been able to force the issue but dragged this far out into space their options were significantly reduced. Unless they felt like locking themselves in their quarters like petulant children, they were forced to do as the Sith wished.

No doubt exactly as she had intended.

The door hissed shut and sealed behind them as they walked off the bridge and into the captain's ready room. The small office was elegantly furnished in a sleek, modern style that Lucine favored as of late, with a small desk set-up and a simple pull-out bed for when she was required to be on watch.

"Take a seat. Can I get you two anything to drink? I believe I have a bottle of Corellian Wine, 0 ABY, a celebratory bottling for the fall of the Empire—"

"Get to the point, soft-skin." Grot growled, his patience wearing thin. Decima shot him a glare, disappointed in her subordinates' manners, but couldn't argue with the sentiment. Lucine was dragging this out, knowing her, she was doing it for a reason.

"How rude!" Lucine cried exaggeratedly but quickly broke into a sly smile, "I suppose I have kept you waiting for long enough. My sincerest apologies, but the summit instructed me specifically

not to tell anyone until we had arrived.”

“The summit?” Decima questioned, getting a sudden cold chill.

“Indeed, from the Consul directly.”

“What interest does the consul have in a simple trading expedition?” Decima scowled, not liking where this was heading.

“Put simply, we are not here to trade goods, but people.”

“Slavery!” Decima shouted, slamming her hands on the table with rage. Grot reached over to calm her, narrowing his eyes.

“No, not slaves, is it? You mean prisoners. The Collective.”

“Precisely” Lucine smiled and nodded, leaning back to relax in her chair. Grot leaned back, satisfied with his deduction, and Decima sat back down as well. Her previous flash of rage had passed, but something was still not right.

“The Iron Throne was supposed to be handling those negotiations,” Decima said accusingly.

“And they will be, just as scheduled, one week from now. Arcona has simply seen fit to have a round of... preliminary negotiations.” The leaned forward conspiratorially, resting on her elbows.

“And I assume the throne has not been made aware of these... preliminaries.” Decima clenched her fist, knowing that she had been played. Crossing the Iron Throne was dangerous, but Lucine had left her very little choice.

“Of course not, that would defeat the point. The Iron Throne will still have its negotiations, Arcona simply wishes a certain degree of... insurance that they turn in our favor. To that end, the summit felt it would be prudent to iron out a few details beforehand.”

“You mean to undermine the Iron Throne and settle the negotiations before they have even started. More so, you have made us complicit enough in your scheme that we could not back out even if we wanted,” Grot hissed, finally seeing the scheme for what it was, “Or do you wish to disguise it in a prettier dress, captain?”

“An unkind phrasing, but you have the right of it, Grot.”

“So why us?” Decima questioned “Aren’t there more qualified diplomats in Voidbreaker for this? People more suited to this sort of... unsavory task?”

“Certainly, but I was not looking for diplomats or operatives. Relations between the Collective and Arcona are still poor, and these negotiations are bound to be tense. A certain degree of muscle goes a long way towards ensuring things stay peaceful,” Lucine swiveled her chair around, looking out the viewport behind her, “Moreover, of all the members of Voidbreaker, I can be certain that you two have no ulterior motives.”

Grot brightened up considerably at this, pleased at the prospect of some action. A normal trade expedition promised very little in the hunter’s eyes, but perhaps he might gain something from a mission like this. Beside him, Decima growled, gripping her vibroaxe in frustration. She could feel the anger bubbling inside of her, the rage of being dragged unwillingly into another dangerous scheme. She was about to voice her objections when they were interrupted by a loud beeping from Lucine’s intercom, signaling an incoming message.

“Captain, we have detected one contact emerging at the edge of the system. They’ve set an intercept course will make contact just outside of the system’s belt. Your orders?”

Lucine grinned wickedly, and responded “Transmit a single communications ping, narrow band, vermillion level encryption. Place the ship on Yellow alert.” The Sith closed the intercom channel, and turned towards her guests. She gestured towards the door, a small smile playing on her lips.

“I believe we are needed on the bridge?”

The shuttle was dead silent as they made their way across the asteroid field towards the Collective ship.

Like most Technocratic Guild constructions, their diplomatic ship was a work of art. Like the *Voidbreaker*, the *System Operator* was based off of an old Consular-class design, but altered in such a way that you’d be hard-pressed to see the resemblance. All the hard angles had been removed and replaced with sleek curved armor. The ship looked disturbingly organic, like a manta-ray gliding along above the asteroid belt.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Grot said simply, checking his weapons for the umpteenth time.

“I understand your reticence, but do not worry, the Collective knows as well as us that this meeting is in their best interests.” Lucine chuckled in response, idly inspecting her aspect. She was dressed to the nines for the occasion, in an elegant green dress that flattered her revery curve. Her companions, who wore their usual armor and weapons, looked considerably out-of-place.

“But must the meeting take place on their ship,” Decima interjected with a slight growl, “We rely entirely too much on their hospitality, surely the *Voidbreaker* has suitable facilities.”

“It does indeed, but this was a necessary concession. The Collective insisted upon selecting the meeting place,” Lucine said soothingly, “I feel no need to worry, I am certain you two shall protect me”

There was a brief static sensation as the shuttle passed through the hanger shield on *System Operator*. Much to Lucine’s dismay, this sent her hair flying, frizzing up into the air and ruining an hour’s worth of preparation back on the ship.

“Ah by the — Pilot! Circle around a bit, we’re not ready to land yet!” Lucine shouted up to the cockpit. She reached down under the seat and pulled out a small handbag, “Now where did I put that brush...”

Grot and Decima shared a look, and couldn’t help but smile at their leader’s antics. In an instant, the tension in the shuttle was dispelled, and they steeled themselves for the mission ahead. Neither of them noticed the sly smirk on Lucine’s face as she brushed out her hair.

After a short detour the shuttle set down with a dull thud on the deck plating of the *System Operator*, and the trio lined up at the ramp.

“Just remember what we practiced. Look nice and intimidating, and let me do the talking” Lucine whispered, giving a cheery thumbs up to her companions.

With a hiss, the door on the shuttle came down, and they walked out into the hanger. Waiting for them they could see the Collective delegation, a much larger group than theirs.

“Master Rai’kan! A pleasure to meet you at last...” Lucine smiled warmly, easily spitting out wave after wave of pleasantries as Grot and Decima did their best to ignore the conversation. Instead, they looked around the hanger and were suitably unnerved by what they saw.

The Collective was not so foolish as to let a trained Force user like Lucine on board their ship without insurance. The Collective delegation had brought its own cadre of bodyguards, five of the cybernetically enhanced warriors that had earned such fame during the war. Turrets and guards were positioned at every entrance and exit to the hanger, with enough firepower to vaporize both them and their shuttle if they tried anything funny.

If Lucine noticed this, she didn’t react. They were led by the Collective delegation into a large, spartanly decorated meeting room. A host of protocol droids and robotic servants were already present, Hors-d’oeuvres and drinks already present on small silver trays. Music played softly in the background from an electronic speaker.

It seems the Collective delegation was a bit bigger than first imagined, as they were almost twice as many delegates in the room than those who came to meet them.

“Were there supposed to be so many?” Decima questioned, feeling slightly anxious over the number of people in the room

“Of course darling. The Collective, unlike our dear Clan, does not have the luxury of an autocratic ruler. Every organization in the collective wants its say, so they all sent a party of representatives,” Lucine smiled, and gestured to the rest of the room “Relax! It’s all according to plan.

Lucine wandered off into the crowd, schmoozing with the assembled diplomats and leaving Grot and Decima behind. The two of them shared a look, before the Trandoshan shrugged, and moved to follow the Sith. The Iktotchi couldn’t help but frown at the blatant unprofessionalism. Here, on an enemy ship, and the two of them were busy partying.

Decima wandered to the corner of the room, posting up where she could get a clear view of the entire crowd. Lucine was busily engaged in some sort of heated conversation, shoulder to shoulder with the other delegates, while Grot had somehow been goaded into regaling a group of lackeys with one of his hunting stories. Not that he needed much goading to begin with.

She gripped her vibroaxe tighter. Something wasn’t right here. She flicked her eyes around the crowd, concentrating, and noticed a very slight movement at the edge of the crowd. Like a shadow flickering at the edge of her vision. She pushed off the wall, moving to investigate —

“Hey there!” Her vibroaxe was up in a moment, her feet sliding into a lowered stance as she turned to face the man who interrupted her. Surprised, the dark-skinned human put up his hand in a placating gesture “Hey! woah, easy there, just trying to make conversation.”

Realizing where she was Decima put her weapon back down. She turned to look at where she had seen the shadow, but whatever it had been, if it had been anything, it was gone.

“I’m sorry if I startled you. I’m Jacob Wright, I’m with the Capital Enterprises delegation. And you?” The man said, smiling. Upon second glance, he was actually quite charming, perfectly white teeth and a deep voice that seemed to fill the entire the room. Involuntarily, The Iktotchi found herself flushed.

“...Decima”

“Decima huh? You came in with the Brotherhood delegation right?” The man leaned in closer, a move that both exited Decima and made her increasingly uncomfortable. Despite this, she couldn’t bring herself to turn him away. There was something about him she couldn’t place, like she’d seen him before.

“What exactly do you want,” She asked gruffly, suddenly feeling shy.

Far away in the crowd, Lucine frowned and excused herself from the group.

“Nothing, nothing, I just saw you standing here alone. You haven’t talked to a single person since you came in, it can’t hurt to relax just a bit, can it?” Decima’s mouth ran dry. She could feel her heart pounding, her mind racing. what was this, who was this?

“Y-yes, I... I suppose it wouldn’t hurt”

“Decima!” Lucine shouted, drawing her attention. The Iktotchi turned to face her, seeing her superior pushing quite rapidly through the crowd. She turned back to Jacob, but the man was already frowning and turning to leave.

“Hey! Wait —” She outstretched her hand, trying to catch him by the shoulder, but was met by nothing but empty air. The man’s image swiftly disappeared from view, quickly fading into nothingness.

An illusion...

“Decima! What are you—”

“We need to secure this room! Now!”

“What is the—” A shout interrupted the both of them, followed by a sharp crash as one of the delegates collapsed to the floor. His eyes were wide and dilated, the veins in his neck bulging obscenely as he struggled for breath

“An assassin!” Shouted one of the guards

“Master Rai’Kan! Traitors!” Shouted another, and soon their weapons were raised. Two cyborgs moved in on Lucine and Decima, trying to restrain them.

“We are not your enemies here!” Decima shouted, trying to calm the crowd.

“Liar!”

“Brotherhood scum!”

“Seize them!”

“Touch them and die!” Grot turned and raised his pistol, moving close to Lucine, standing

back-to-back with Decima. The Iktotchi locked eyes with Lucine, their minds connecting for just long enough to transmit a message.

There is another on board the ship. A powerful force user. He has poisoned master Rai'Kan.

Lucine took a deep breath, trying to get a handle on the situation.

"Everyone calm down, let's not jump to conclusions. Anyone here could have attacked Master Rai'Kan. First, we need to see if he's okay; I have a number of medicines on my person that might help." Lucine pulled out her handbag, slowly pulling out a kit she kept for such occasions. "Grot, Decima, put your weapons down."

Reluctantly, the two bodyguards put their weapons away. Unsure now of what to do, the cyborg guards hesitated enough to let Lucine through to Master Rai'Kan, though kept under close watch. Leaning next to the incredibly pale man, Lucine did her best to treat him by injecting what anti-toxins she had. Slowly, color returned to the man's face, and he stopped trembling. Still, he did not awake.

While the Sith saw to the poisoned delegate, Decima asked, "Has anyone left this room since Master Rai'Kan was attacked?"

"No," one of the cyborg guards, the captain it seemed, answered, "My men and I would have noticed if anyone tried to enter or leave."

"Decima!" Grot called, and gestured towards the corner of the room. Near the floor, a large ventilation grate was located. The Trandoshan walked over and tested the grate, finding it unscrewed. "The assassin must have exited through here!"

Standing up from her work, Lucine turned towards the delegates.

"Does anyone know where that grate leads?"

"Kark! He's already been through here!" Grot shouted, running passed the burned and decapitated corpses of the Collective's guards. It was definite know, whoever had done this was a Force user, and a capable Lightsaber combatant as well.

"They're fresh! He's not far" Decima cried, bounding ahead of their cyborg escort.

They burst through an open airlock into one of the Auxiliary hangers, just in time to see a dark-skinned human clamber up into one of the transport shuttles. Grot fired off a few shots with

his revolver, the bullets impacting into the hard durasteel and sending fragments flying across the hanger. A lucky slug caught the man in the leg, sending him tumbling into the shuttle, but the ramp was already closing.

“Open fire!” The cyborg commander shouted, the guard detail unleashing a fusillade of blaster bolts as the shuttle started up. With a roar the engines powered up to maximum, soaring out of the hanger and into the asteroid belt beyond.

Lucine opened up her communicator back to the *Voidbreaker* “There’s a shuttle exiting the *System Operator’s* hanger bay! Shoot it down!”

“No good captain, he’s already in the belt. Couldn’t get a target lock.”

“Kark!” Decima kicked the floor in frustration “He got away”

“Any idea who that was, Decima?” Lucine asked as they rode the shuttle back to the *Voidbreaker*

“He said his name was Jacob Wright, though there’s no one of that name of the *System Operator’s* roster”

“So he is a mystery,” Grot said, leaning forward, “Could he be Inquisitorius?”

Lucine frowned, rubbing her temple and leaning back in her seat “Potentially. Whoever that was, and whoever he works for, they knew precisely where to strike to hurt us the most.”

“I thought the negotiations were still going ahead?” Decima questioned, confused.

Lucine sighed, “The negotiations over the prisoners, yes, but I was sent her for more than that by the summit”

“More details you have elected to keep quiet from us?” Grot hissed

“I do what I must.” Lucine glared back at Grot, her eyes steely and hard, “Master Rai’Kan was a special delegate from the Technocratic Guild. I was given orders to discuss a trading agreement with him for Collective cybernetics, and the potential for further cooperation between Arcona and the Guild.”

“Yet more treason against the throne that you have so kindly embroiled us in” Decima snapped

accusingly.

“It was a deal known only to me and a very select number of people. With Master Rai’Kan comatose, there’s no way to continue the negotiations.” Lucinescowled, obviously frustrated by the setback, “This means whoever sent that man has an intimate knowledge of not only the Clan’s operations but of Voidbreaker’s specifically. For whatever reason, they’re trying to sabotage our efforts.”

Decima gripped her vibroaxe, and sighed. She was not suited for this cloak-and-dagger business, but a threat like this could not be allowed to continue existing, “So it’s a declaration of war.”

“By an enemy whose name we don’t even know, and whose capabilities we have no way of estimating,” Lucine said coldly.

Across from her, Grot could only smile.

“So we hunt them down, and remove them!”