

A knock sounded at the door.

Zujenia's head snapped up, registering the sound from the little nest she'd made herself at the kitchen table out of datapads, empty caf cups, datachips, and her socks and shirt and sweater from the previous day. She had been hunched in place since Terran had kicked her out of her office after the last full summit meeting. He wouldn't let her work there? Fine. She'd work at home. There was plenty to do.

Too much to do to possibly think.

And if she'd uncharacteristically yelled at Diy the last time the not-Zelosian had tried to muscle her away from the table and off to a shower or somewhere to eat, then, well, it was just work stress.

Work stress that had her snapping at even *Luka*. Work stress that made her too sick to hold down food and not anything in her belly, nope. No Ryns and their drunken stupid bunzy faces here—

Another knock, this one more a demanding bang, saved her from her derailing brain. She shook herself, looked for a caf cup that still had some dregs in it — how old it was compared to its companions was anyone's guess — and smoothed down her hair. Her bangs stuck up, dried with sweat and oil in clumpy strands, but oh well. She had a shirt and pants on and that would have to be enough. There was too much to do to bother with the rest or *any stupid thinking*.

The half-Ryn pattered over to the entryway, depressed the opening mechanism, and watched the door whisk open as she started to say, "Who is it?"

The words died in her throat.

Satsi Tameike stood over her, arms crossed, face scrunched in a firm, grave scowl. She had a gold scarf wrapped around her scarred throat, but her wedding ring still peeked out under it, a dim glimmer. She carried a baby bag but no baby.

"We need to talk," the Consul said without preamble.

Zujenia nearly shut the door in her face. She controlled herself though, schooling her features into what she hoped was an uncaring mask.

"What are *you* doing here?" the hybrid hissed. Her exhausted kind sounds and fumbled desperately. How could she have not sensed the damned harlot? She had been so busy trying to repress all her thoughts, all her feelings and especially all her senses, so as to not feel anything, especially not the little flickers of light in her middle, she'd completely missed this.

Even as she strained now, the Force gave her no urgent warnings, so perhaps physical harm wasn't immediate. Perhaps they weren't under attack or some other miracle or disaster.

Still.

"I just said, didn't I? Clean the self-pitying desperation out of your ears, girl."

What would really happen, really, if one killed an active Consul?

Zujenia still bodily blocked the doorway. "If you needed me you should've just commed. I'm working as fast as I can."

"This ain't about the clan. Well, not really."

"Then what?"

"Gonna let me in?"

Somehow, she let go of the wall without her arm shaking and stepped stiffly aside. If Satsi had any new opinions about the state of Zuji's apartment, she didn't share them. Instead, the Human just walked in, set her things down, and turned to face the half-Ryn as she resumed her own spot at the table; she didn't sit, though, too uncomfortable.

"Kordy is in a bad way. He's on a bender too fast and hard to pull up out of. I seen that before, I been there before. He's one bad day away from offing his fluffy self. I've tried to ban him from the cantinas but if you want to medicate that bad, you find a way. Strong talking to him don't work, Uji don't work. You need to talk some sense into him before it's too late."

"Why don't you talk to him?" snapped the Aedile in response. She knew all this already. She'd already helped pick his drunk bum up, already helped Shay. Who did this akk think she was, asking her to do *more*?

Without her permission, words flew from her lips, hot and bitter and hurt.

"Why don't YOU talk to him, since he picked you?"

"He didn't pick me, you furry idiot."

"Well he didn't stay with me." Zujenia tried to repress the tears in her voice but couldn't, and shook with shame. Satsi seemed to balk at that, looking away and ducking her head.

"I..." the woman crossed her scarred arms and frowned. "I wanted him to. Pick me. But not really. It wasn't about him, it was about you, and I. I didn't— I don't— goddammit, mutt. He's not

happy with just me, and I, I'm not all about him. He's *mine*, but he's not my person, he's not my first, he's not who I want to live for, and he deserves to be somebody's. And maybe I didn't realize that that was supposed to be you."

"What are you saying?" the hybrid's jaw chattered, struggling to hold back a wobbling lip, a hiccup. She would not cry in front of this horrible woman, she would not.

"I'm sorry," Satsi said softly, glancing up. "I've been there, okay, I've been so in love it killed me to not have him, but it was *everything* to have the hurt. It meant he was there. I kept him in my life. He kept me. I have lost that worse than you know but— I got it too, didn't I? I got mine. And I was too busy being stubborn to admit that even if you weren't good enough for Kordy, didn't mean he felt the same. Shadows know my brother deserves more than me, that my daughter sure as hell deserves more than us, but what we got, it's ours. And you and Kordy... He's a wreck without you, and you look like shit without him, and I was part of breaking that. So, I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?" Zujenia scoffed, thought she might be crying. She covered her eyes, turned her aborted sobs into hitching, humorless laughter instead. "YOU, Satsi Tameike, you're sorry? Hah! I can't believe this. Well you know what, Bleu is really sorry too, and it doesn't make a darned difference. It didn't stop him. It didn't stop you. It didn't make ME do anything! So, bother with it! Sorry." Her scoff came again, a suspicious sniff.

"Okay, look." Satsi's tone turned oddly soothing, sweet and attentive, just for a second. "Look, hey. Look at me, spots. Why don't we go find our boy and sober him up, get him in the shower with us, get nice and clean, then we can all go to bed? Yeah? Make nice. I'll treat ya real good, I promise, he wasn't visiting me for no reason. Or if you don't want we can just stick to him, don't gotta play with each other too."

Zujenia's mouth worked soundlessly a few times, her brain struggling to process the older woman's blunt, sincere words. Satsi actually *leaned into* the half-Ryn's space as she said it, not touching, but certainly making it known, as if to duck close for a kiss but leaving her room to make the move.

"A...a..."

"Didn't think I'd get you speechless already. I'd planned to work really hard for that."

"Are you out of your mind?!" the hybrid finally managed, sandy tail lashing hard enough to knock over the chair behind her. "Are you— are you actually suggesting a, a, a th...us...you...and him! A...a—"

"Three-way? Threesome? Coronet tower? Nerfherd? Thrustercluster? Two-tailed sandwich and a hummie in-between?" offered the ex-gangster helpfully, her brow quirked.

Zujenia's flush deepened, splotchy, reddening her cheeks and nose and neck. She took one deep, choked breath.

"*ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR DARN MIND?!*" shrieked the half-Ryn, shoving the Human slightly back at the same time she retreated a step, suddenly all the way across the kitchen.

"Obviously." Satsi's tone was still wry, but it was forced now, her expression shuttering some. She crossed her arms and popped a hip. "What you so upset about, squeaker? I'm only tryin' ta help. We all gotta work somethin' out here, and you and Kordy ain't speaking, so hey, little nonverbal intervention. Trust me, sex can be good for... vulnerability. Opening up. People really like to blab when they're high on afterglow and snuggly, and it's a lot harder to hide or lie when you're naked and balls deep in someone unless you've got practice." Her shrug strove for nonchalant, but there was a hitch there, some hardness under her tight grin. "I've been at this a long time. Doesn't just have to be fake, or a tool, or for fun. It's... connection too."

"*This... *this** is your karked up idea of fixing things?!" demanded Zujenia, cursing. Her golden amber eyes were narrowed to venomous slits. She made a disgusted noise. "You want us all in bed together?! What is WRONG WITH YOU?"

"You don't want an actual answer to that."

Satsi's posture and face had finally tightened all the way up to cold and angry, and she glared back at the half-Ryn now.

"No," the hybrid growled, **spat**. "No! No, no, no. I want nothing to **do** with **you**. I don't want you anywhere near me, or him, y-you, you karker! I don't want to talk to Bleu either! I am done, you hear? No! Of all the stupid, insensitive things to suggest—"

"Hey!" snapped the Human, hands fisting. "I'm being frakking genuine here, mutt, and I ain't gonna let you spit on me just cause I gave your boy better pussy."

"GET OUT!" Zujenia yelled, lashing out with one hand. The door slammed open behind her intruder with a Force-fueled bang. "Get out of here, you gosh-darned whoring she-akk!"

For a second it looked like Satsi might challenge that. Might snarl, "Make me," and launch herself at the hybrid. But she didn't. Instead, she growled a string of invective that would have peeled the haul of a starship, snatched her bag, and spun on her heel, marching towards the exit. She paused just inside the entryway, shoulders heaving and hands curling and uncurling.

There was a long moment of heavy breathing and silence.

Finally, the Human ground out words over her shoulder. "If you want to visit Shay, she's gonna

be staying with us for awhile. Til Kordy...Just let me or Uji know if yer comin' and if I'm there I'll get scarce. Kid should see her mom."

Then, she stomped off, very obviously making sure Zujenia saw her kick over a potted plant on her way down to the street.

The hybrid stared after her for a long time. Didn't know for long. She just stared.

Then, eventually, she went over, closed the door, turned around, and slid down it, sinking to the floor with her back to the frame.

And she broke to little pieces, too tired and too stressed and too in pain from the sharp, stabbing sensation in her middle not to cry. And cry.

And cry.