

Port Ol'val
What remains of the Dockside
36 ABY

The sound of rugged bristles running against harsh stone filled the cavernous, blacked-out space. Small motions, *brush-brush-brush*, were followed by a heavier sweep, *swoosh*, and the pattern began anew. Echoes of this slow, meticulous work bounced off the far walls that once housed cargo cranes, flight control decks and astromech bays but which were now little more than burnt-out husks.

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

The vast gaping maw of the approach, known as the Kas Tunnel, lay somewhere beyond with the only real evidence of its presence the ominous way that all sound seemed to behave when around it and a faint wind that did not seem entirely natural. In the near perpetual darkness, with only the narrow, pale beam of a headlight to guide his way, the Sullustan groundskeeper continued his toil.

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Behind him, back where the rotten heart of the shadowport lay, he could sometimes hear sharp clangs of cargo crates being unloaded, or rather *dropped*, and the muffled blaring of music that some helpful soul had decided to blast out of their speakers to help motivate the work crews. For [Pubula](#), these were but momentary distractions.

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Ever since the *Voidbreaker* had arrived back from its latest haul for supplies, harried from Collective supply ships in the best traditions of space-piracy, their glorious, if rather stunted, leader had decided that the crew ought to help in the rebuilding process. And that had meant *all* of the crew.

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Everyone would contribute and everyone had been given a task. The Wookiee was fixing up heating elements in the base's reactor room, trying to CPR the hypermatter reactor back into life with some tender, loving, percussive maintenance. The Twi'lek was handing out rations and articles of needlessly fuzzy, yet suitably warm clothing. The tall half-Bothan was helping in fixing up the hoversleds and transport skiffs to get the supplies flowing better and the temperamental Human had promised not to set things on fire or blow them up until the others had at first had a chance to fix things.

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Of course, that had meant he too had been assigned a job and so here he was, clearing out debris. With a broom. Like he used to. Perhaps there wasn't an imminent danger of falling

into a bottomless pit that you could not see when cleaning up inside the *Voidbreaker*, but overall he hardly noticed the difference. And neither did anyone else. Not that anyone would have paid attention to what he did in the first place.

Brush-brush-

Pubula stopped and leaned on his broom. Beads of sweat adorned his wrinkled brow like pearls and he pulled out a worn handkerchief to meticulously dab the offending moisture from rolling into his eyes. The motion stopped at the far corner of his brow, keen ears perking up as a faint flicker of disturbed static bounced up the walls of the Kal Tunnel. A moment later, he could hear the distorted humming of doppler-shifted ion thrusters before a wall of over pressurized air shot out from the gaping maw.

The shunt was enough to topple the stunted man to his back, broom clattering from his grasp and dancing on the bare stone before toppling down into the abyss. It had been his favorite one. He had no time to mourn as stablights as bright as lightsabers shone up through the Tunnel and almost blinded him with their intensity, leaving patterns burned upon his retinas while a roaring boom filled the cavernous space. In a flash of heat and ionic discharges, the hulking shape of an XS Light Freighter emerged from the corridor at a reckless speed, engaging its retro thrusters at the last moment to almost tap the ceiling above, before gliding gracefully into what remained of docking cradle seven.

Pubula felt the heavy ship make contact with the platform as a rumbling tremor shot through his being, the pile of stone and debris he'd been building all day shaking and collapsing in response to the violent landing. The Sullustan rolled aside to not be crushed by the spilled fruits of his labor, spitting out a string of curses so foul it was good no-one was around to hear them.

Flicking off engine controls in practiced patterns, Yumni Ha went through the methodical process of powering down her ship after a rather amusing approach run. *Esperanza* had proven to be far beyond a normal freighter when it came to such maneuvers and though she was not as nimble as a newer YT-series transport, the old workdewback still had the finesse, if properly piloted, to pull off pleasingly precise changes in speed and heading.

The existence of the Ol'val installation had come to her as some news. Though she'd been aware of a shadow port existing somewhere in the general sector, she'd not heard much about it in recent times and with all the other hassle going on with the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Co, it had fallen down on her list of priorities. It had not been until Zujenia had contacted her to ask for some shipments of supplies to the port that she'd actually learned about the port's location and rather spotty heritage over the brief discussion. From what she'd gathered, it wasn't much different to most of its ilk.

Standing within what might have been generously described as a burnt-out husk, it seemed all the legends were true and as underwhelming as she'd expected. Yet, it was clear the place held potential if only someone with vision and drive came around to nurture it into existence. Lucky for the port, then, that she'd decided to handle this shipment personally.

Striding down the freighter's boarding ramp with long, elegant steps, the Kaminoan passed by the stunted Sullustan, ignoring the exotic expletives he muttered not-too-subtly at her passing, and headed for the more populated areas. Her head on constant swivel, Yumni took in the location of landing pads, cargo cranes and gantries, storage docks, machinery shops and more. It was all pieces in a puzzle that began to coalesce within her mind, a three dimensional work of art that would unlock the place's full potential.

She smiled. Even with the pieces she had to hand, the resulting shape was pleasing to her balance sheet.

=====

"What do you mean, 'it can't be done'?" the Kaminoan's voice was leaning dangerously close to frustration, her usually toneless intonation shifting in annoyance at the overseer's blunt and repeated refusals.

"Exactly that, can't be done. Excavating that entry tunnel is," the man began counting on his grimy hand, "One, damn dangerous without the original seismographic maps. Two, potentially catastrophic to the rest of the port without really specialized workers. Three, a huge drain on manpower that I can't spare. Four..."

"Yes yes," Yumni sighed, cutting him off before he could move to the second hand. "I agree there are some *challenges* in realizing a new entry tunnel, but the current one is simply too inefficient for what it is meant to accomplish. The deterrence of a difficult approach is far greater to regular traffic than any invader and losing the ability to shuttle in any larger vessels safely is simply unacceptable. I would have assumed your engineering corps would have been able to handle such a minor undertaking."

"We could, for sure," the man scoffed, adjusting his dirtied DDF uniform, "but like I said, my hands are tied and you've got to clear that with the higher-ups first before we get on with that sorta thing. Right now, our orders are simple and clear: Clear out the rubble from the habs and un-roadblock the major arteries so goods and power can flow. Anything else, bring it up with mistress Vasano."

The name caused a minute shift of discomfort in the usually reserved Kaminoan. She'd met the redheaded Aedile only once before, though even then only in passing and without introductions. Still, something about the noble chafed her greatly and the prospect of trying to make an argument with her about reallocating precious DDF resources for her own project did not strike her as tenable.

Nodding her understanding, she chose to leave the overseer to his duties and instead headed deeper into the ruined innards of the port. Perhaps she could find an alternative means of accomplishing her plans. It wasn't like setbacks were new to her, but she also knew that nothing worth pursuing ever came easy.

=====

The quality of local libations was swiftly discovered to be sub-par to say the least, the Kaminoan finding herself struggling to remain sociable while conscious about the lack of proper fermentation and the associated microbial risks in her beverage. Bar after bar, though calling the hollowed out dens where fermented cave swill was being served such was a greater generosity than she was accustomed to, had proven to offer little in the shape of answers and even her good spirits were being fouled by the rancid taste of local brews.

Taking a few capsules to calm her stomach and counteract whatever lurked in the 'beer', Yumni followed the rather unhelpful directions to one final hole-in-the-ruins that perhaps might contain what she suspected was still lurking in the asteroid's depths. Distorted sounds of music from a damaged holorecord player bounced off bleak permacrete walls and the surly growls of inebriation soon followed as she deftly crossed the cragged street.

Bending so low she almost doubled over, the Kaminoan peeked her head inside the lowlit den, turning a dozen or more towards her as her pale visage disturbed the depressed darkness. Old, worn and wrinkled faces met her gaze, rotund and squat bodies belaying old strength that still hid somewhere beneath the flab. She might have found what she was looking for.

Stepping inside while hunched over in a rather uncomfortable crouch, her head almost scratching the ceiling as she did, Yumni shuffled over to what passed as the counter and brushed off a seat before taking it. Knees not too far from her chest, the Kaminoan looked not too dissimilar to a grown man within a doll house, but she did not let it deter her in the slightest as she raised an elongated digit and ordered a brew.

"Excuse me," she spoke up just as the bartender was turning away after depositing a distinctly unwashed mug filled to the brim with swill before her. "I am looking for someone who might be knowledgeable in the excavations and mining that took place upon this asteroid. I don't suppose anyone that would fit that description might be present?" She slid an unmarked credit chit across the counter.

The bartender palmed the currency and threw his soiled 'wash' rag over her shoulder, nodding sideways at an ancient at the back, his beard so long it almost reached his knees. "Might know what you're after, but piece of advice, don't expect much. He hasn't spoken in years."

"Noted," Yumni replied, leaving her mug where it stood, only to have it hoovered up by the thirsty patron closest to her the moment she'd turned her back.

Shuffling past reeking patrons, some still awake and others passed out, the Kaminoan tried her best not to step or touch anything unsavory, a tall order given her ungainly dimensions and every surface fulfilling those descriptions. Finally managing to reach the ancient who seemed to stare intently at a particular spot in the opposite wall, she halted for a moment and waited for a reaction. She received none. Annoyed by the cloying atmosphere, nauseated by the rancid brew she'd forced herself to drink and tired of the increasingly

pointless chase, she chose to make a bold move.

She sat down right opposite him.

The man did not move, but something flashed in beneath his furrowed brow. Keen eyes shifted under bushy eyebrows. His body tensed, creased skin trembling minutely from the strain.

“Are you—?” Yumni leaned closer.

“Stop,” the man interjected, not forcefully, but with such suddenness it caught her by surprise. She’d not been expecting a swift response. “Don’t move.” Something in his voice gave her reason to obey, his tone far from threatening and more of a stern statement of need.

“May I inquire why?”

“You move, we all die,” he replied bluntly, reaching for his cup to wet his tongue and hoarse voice. He slurped the brew greedily and wiped his mustache on the back of his crusted sleeve. It seemed he’d picked up the habit a while ago, judging by the moldy patina.

“And this is because...?”

“Crack, behind you, it’s been growing. I’ve watched. It appeared when I sat, haven’t moved since. Now please, stop moving.”

Yumni blinked slowly, examining the drunkard. He couldn’t be serious. There was no way this whole place could go down from such a minute crack that was almost imperceptible from the bare duracrete that surrounded it. “Pardon if I find that rather implausible, mister...?”

“Dufane. And I swear on my dead mum, that’s the truth of it. You move, this whole place comes down.”

“Suppose that were true, what course of action would you suggest, Mr.Dufane?”

“Nothing, we just sit and drink. And wait.”

“I’m not particularly fond of doing *nothing*. In fact, I am diametrically opposed to the notion. When you stand still, you’re actually moving back, since the rest of the galaxy never stops.”

“Hmph, spoken like someone who’s afraid to commit.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“Don’t think there’s a missus long-neck in your life...”

Yumni stared at him as Dufane cracked a mostly toothless grin. Her lips pursed into a line. "Two things. First, I am female. Second, I am quite happy without a bond-mate."

"Oh, erm, pardon... I, uh, you didn't seem like any lady I've met before and trust me, I've seen quite a few in my day," Dufane struggled.

"I'll take your word for it," she replied coldly. "Now, if you'll excuse me..." She pressed her palms against the sticky table, pushing down to help herself up when the Human shot out a hand and grabbed her wrist.

"No!" The sudden yelp was loud enough to draw every aware pair of eyes to them.

"Mr.Dufane, I would be pleased if you relinquished my wrist," the Kaminoan spoke as softly and calmly as she could manage.

"Ya *can't* move," he replied tersely. "She moves and we're all dead!" he turned to address the rest of the bar.

There were some murmurs that sounded ominously alarmed.

"Mr.Dufane has merely had too much to drink and is delirious. Please, let me be on my way and I will not bother you fine gents any further. It appears coming this way was an exercise in futility after all," Yumni spoke up in turn, though making no attempt to free her hand from the man's grimy grip.

"If Dufane thinks you should sit down, I'd sit down." It was the barkeep that spoke up. "He's got a hunch about these things."

"Of what, baseless threats?" Yumni scoffed, standing up to leave when a faint tremor shook the building, making specks of grey plaster float down from the half-crumbled ceiling. She froze in her tracks.

For a moment, the bar was as still as a grave.

The moment dragged on, and on.

Finally, Yumni broke the deathly silence.

"Suppose we agreed your claim had *some* merit..." Yumni calmly returned to Dufane. "Would the rest of the clientele be free to vacate the premises?"

"Aye."

Turning her head slightly to address the greater crowd, she spoke up once more. "Then I suggest they do so at once and leave. Calmly."

She waited. He waited. They all waited and no-one moved a muscle.

“She said, *leave*,” Dufane called out, his weary voice once again showing that remarkable air of authority without being harsh or snappy.

The effect was almost instantaneous, as the patrons swiftly filed outside, dragging with them those of their number too inebriated to walk on their own. Within a few short moments, the place was almost empty, with only the bartender waiting in the doorway.

“So, uh, I’ve got a blaster if you...”

“No,” Yumni stated outright.

“I know it’s probably not a big difference, but being trapped...”

“No,” she repeated herself.

“Very well,” the bartender sighed, shrugging and leaving the two to their tomb to be.

“You know, it was a generous offer,” Dufane stated. “I’ve been trapped in a cave-in before. Not pleasant. Drives you insane before you die. Unless you’re crushed to death at once.”

“How *do* you know all these things anyway?”

“Not that it matters, but I was a miner.”

“Overseer?”

“How did you guess?”

“Oh, I just had a hunch,” Yumni replied. The man’s natural authority began to make more sense now. “Asteroids?”

“Do I look like a spice miner?”

“I don’t tend to judge, but I suppose Wookiees do excel at it better than Humans...”

“And what’s it to you anyway? You don’t look anything like a miner.”

“That would be accurate, yes. I am a trader by profession. A trader, with plans.”

“Hmph, we’ve had people with plans aplenty in Ol’val. Never ended well for anyone, especially the planners.”

“Sounds like you’ve had bad planners, then.”

“No, just greedy and self-centered.”

The two exchanged a look, the Human flinging a barb and the Kaminoan blissfully unaware of the slight.

“I hardly see how that is relevant, but rest assured I’m not here to strip away anything from Ol’val. Seems like there is very little to be taken away anyway.”

“Ain’t that a relief? A shame neither of us will be walking out of here alive.”

Yumni was silent for a moment and then began to slowly turn around. Flakes as big as her palm chipped off the ceiling and crashed on the floor, pattering off her shoulders.

“Ey? What are you doing? You really going to die with your back on me?”

“No, I intend to live for many more years, mr.Dufane. Dying would be very bad for business,” Yumni replied, her matter-of-fact tone so jarring in that situation it gave the ancient miner pause. She reached for her belt and pulled out a small tool from a utility pouch. A grinder of sorts for minor ship repair.

Spinning up the diamond bit, she pressed the tool into the permacrete wall a few scant centimeters from the crack tip. A high-pitched scream filled the air, grey dust spouting out as the tool bit into the hardened pseudo-stone and ground its way deeper inside.

“Are you mad?!” Dufane screamed, though too terrified to actually move. “You’ll kill us both!”

Yumni gave no reply, simply pressing the tool deeper as the crack began to expand. Her hand steady like a surgeon’s, she drove the spinning tool bit into the wall as far as it would go, and pulled it out.

The wall did not collapse. The ceiling did not come down.

She brought the tool further down and repeated the procedure on the other end of the crack while the miner stared at her in mute shock, struggling to comprehend why he wasn’t buried beneath tonnes of permacrete and rebar. Yumni pulled back the tool and pocketed it once more, before turning to the gawking Dufane and nodding.

“That ought to give us a few moments until the propagation begins anew. I suggest we vacate the room at once.”

The Human, if he had any reservations, found his hand forced as the Kaminoan brushed past him with a hasty step, fleeing out of the sunken bar while the building gently groaned around them. Emerging from the darkened cave and into the relative light of the shady port street, the two found themselves surrounded by the bar’s patrons, and what unmistakably looked like some sort of bet pool.

A jubilant cry and a pair of greedy hands verified that suspicion a moment later.

“Wha...? How?” were the first words Dufane managed to spit out after his racing heart had stopped trying to burst out of his chest.

“Crack propagation. Same trick we use to mend freighter hulls. Round off the crack tip to distribute the load and it won’t shear open a whole bulkhead,” Yumni replied as calmly as she could manage, winded as she was. “Now, about this plan. I may have an offer for you and your fellow miners...”

=====

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Brush-brush-brush swoosh

Pubula sighed contently as he pushed the last of the debris back into the huge pile. It had taken him the entire day, but finally everything was clean and the docks ready to be rebuilt. Not even the construction had managed to disturb his work.

“Fire in the hole!”

The Sullustan gave a yelp and peered up at the pile in dread horror. Please no, not again...

A faint tremor shook Ol’val, making pebbles skip and dance on the pavement. A moment later a distant rumbling announced the completion of the excavations. Raising her head up to inspect the tunnel, Yumni Ha adjusted her magnoculars and zoomed in past the rock dust and haze. Her sterile expression widened to a shallow grin.

“Excellent work, Dufane. Your team has outdone itself.”

Somewhere in the background, Pubula danced in joy next to his surviving mound of dirt and debris.

“Don’t mention it, *miss* Ha,” the Overseer chuckled, thumbs stuck through the loops of his new tool belt that matched his ALaS Co coveralls. “You really ought to thank Myrill for saving those old maps. Saved us a lot of surveying.”

“I’ll be sure to give her and you all a bonus,” she replied, taking in measurements with the magnoculars’ laser rangefinder. The new gap they’d blown was wide enough to easily fit any ALaS Co freighter and the notoriously deadly twists and turns had been smoothed out to make even bulkier cargo shuttles able to make the approach without going dead slow. Running the numbers in her mind, she figured a mediocre pilot could fly a GR-75 through the narrows twenty times faster than before. And making things easier for the mediocre pilots was what really counted in the end, aces were notoriously difficult to find and even harder to convince to fly routine cargo.

“What in the seven blazes is going on in here!?” A familiarly gruff voice sounded amid brisk steps of plastoid on stone. “You trying to kill us all?”

The DDF lieutenant she’d talked to before seemed peeved, though also intrigued. Spreading her arms in a supplicant gesture of innocence, Yumni offered a curt nod. “Not at all. Merely saving your men some work. You’ll be happy to know that I’ve —” she glanced down at Dufane “— we’ve completed the tunnel expansion. You can inform mistress Zujenia that she can expect a greatly increased influx of supplies into the city.”

The lieutenant suppressed whatever criticism he’d been prepared to level at her and instead chose a different response. “Zujenia? Haven’t you heard? She’s not in charge anymore.”

“Not in charge?” Yumni inquired. “Then who is?” She asked, dreading the redheaded response that no doubt was to follow.

“Doctor Rhy lance.”

She had not been expecting that. Not at all.

“Doctor Rhy lance?” she repeated, a tad flustered. “I don’t recall meeting him.”

“He’s new, yeah. Appointment was a real surprise to all of us, but he’s who you need to butter up from now on,” the lieutenant replied, looking around the excavation site but finding little to nitpick about.

“I see, well I suppose I ought to go and meet this Doctor Rhy lance then and inform him about the improvement we’ve made. A fine an excuse as any to try out the new and improved tunnel,” she added.

Giving her final instructions to Dufane on their next tasks, including a tablet filled with projects down on Selen that would greatly benefit of some seasoned diggers, she boarded *Esperanza* and gunned the engines. The lumbering craft rising up once more on jets of ionized gas, she swiveled the freighter around and pushed the thruster controls forward. A blast of propulsion washed over the docks as the freighter shot into the darkness, carrying with it a rather pleased Kaminoan.

Off to the side, Pubula let out a panicked yelp as a dark rumble sounded once more and the pile he’d painstakingly collected crumbled once again. He was definitely going to be needing a *much* bigger brush.