

"If you expect that we are going to risk so much, your organization had better be prepared to make it worth our while." The battered copper protocol droid spoke in clipped syllables. The machine's Rodian keeper leaned in, coaxing the automaton along. "Why shouldn't we look around, and see if we cannot find better agreements."

"What do you really expect?" Hazel eyes flashed at the suggestion. "As soon as we make it back home, in our rightful capital, we can allow any suitable partners to have exclusive deals."

The Rodian muttered something darkly. The droid straightened slightly. "These promises sound empty. The investment is not worth the risk, unless you can offer something more."

"The coffers of the Orian Authority are more than sufficient to make up your costs, many times over. Are credits not worthwhile enough?"

The droid tilted its head toward the human. "Sir, if you recall, you had already informed our party that you needed help in seizing your home system. If the coffers are located at your home, how can you promise the coffers will be intact?" The Rodian leaned in toward the droid, motioning with one hand and mumbling at length. The droid waited until its companion had stopped before it continued. "By the sounds of the situation, it seems that this Collective would be a more dependable partner in potential employment agreements. I am sure you understand, sir." The alien and droid continued to converse between themselves. The message was pretty clear. Bentre pushed himself up from the table and began to take a faux-leisurely stroll toward the bar.

*These meetings went about as well as could be expected. Bentre found his thoughts always turned foul towards the end of these meetings. The Clan is floating about among the fleet, or concerning themselves with the auction. I have not even heard from my apprentice yet, so I am sure that is a great sign as to how things are proceeding.*

The day had been spent talking with the locals. He had kept up trying to make small connections that might grow into larger roots. The momentum of the Sadowan Empire, their Sith Empire, would not be stalled while he had anything to say about it. When the calls of Consul and Clan were not in the forefront of his mind, he was diving into the depths of the Holocron Center's archives. For all the data at his fingertips, it always seemed like the Corellian Sith fell short. Either the data was well-hidden, or the records were incomplete.

*By all the Hells, I really hope they are not incomplete. We need a greater source of power to push those Collective nerf-herders out of our home.*

Signalling the bartender, Stahoes stabbed a finger at a green bottle resting upon the shelf. As the bartender walked up with a glass, the Sith considered his options. It was possible he had just failed to make the appropriate inquiries. It was possible some records were hidden. Bentre had assumed, by the nature of his job that he possessed total access to everything held within

the physical and digital confines of the Holocron Center. The bartender poured a steady stream of amber liquid until the fluid teased at the top of the glass.

“Drink up, buddy.” The bartender spoke gruffly, giving a short nod before turning back to another patron.

“The same to you.” Bentre felt the beginning of a sneer, just managing to quell the emotion at the last moment. He carefully lifted the glass, spilling as little as possible, to bring it to his lips. He savored the taste and bite of the whiskey. It was a fruitless endeavor. Stahoes knew that he would have to return to the Perdition. He would speak with his Proconsul, where they would discuss the possibilities and risks. Perhaps he would return to this cantina, to push the matter with this sort of scum.

*It really does not matter, this particular evening. There was a melancholy to the thoughts. I have sewn my seeds in their minds. Our harvest is yet to be seen. Our fight with the Collective will continue, regardless of the outcome of this last meeting.*

The Corellian threw his head back, draining the last of the amber nectar from the glass. Placing it down with an audible clack, he fished in his pocket with his free hand. Tossing an unspecified amount on the bar, he gave the briefest of nods to the bartender. It was time for the Consul to take his leave.

The walk through the cantina was a blur. It was all a numb blur. He teetered between utter assurance of the Clan’s success, and a deep, foreboding sense of their imminent defeat. His mind and emotions were turbulent, and he did not like that fact. Emotions were supposed to be a source of strength for a Sith. Yet, he found it a marked weakness. The double-edged blade of the Sith Code. If he were a more philosophical man, he might have pondered the greater repercussions. Instead, passing out the doors into the cool streets of Nar Shadda,

Lights and signs littered the roads, as speeder traffic swooshed past without regard. He was an ant on the top of a mountain. *This planet, this city will continue to revolve regardless of how things go. My life or death means nothing to these people. Almost makes you think that Palpatine had the right idea with that superlaser. People stand up and take notice of that kind of power. Until some rowdy youths come along and blow up your latest toys. Rebels, Republics, Collectives, Dominions- it does not matter. Someone out there will wreck your poodoo, and hard.* The fate of his Clan seemed so insignificant in those dark moments.

Something struck the back of the moping Consul, bouncing off at an odd angle. Turning on his heel to take stock of the walkway, Bentre quickly spotted a gang of tattooed humanoids glaring at him. There were about a half dozen of their number. The tallest of them, a Pantoran by the look, held another baked good crooked back over his shoulder, obviously prepared to follow up the attack with another. “Get out of here, you loony! We don’t need your sort around here!”

A cold spike of anger trailed down the Sith's spine. *I do not need this right now, you little worm.* As the blue-skinned alien flung the bread product in a short arc through the air, Stahoes followed the unusual projectile with his eyes. Waiting until it was about halfway to its intended target before moving, the human lifted a hand to grasp at the air in front of his, focusing upon the incoming object in the Force. The bagel came to an abrupt stop, as though he had caught the object. Rather than resting in his partially closed hand, it hovered several inches away.

"You had many choices today." The Corellian shook his head as he felt his face flush with anger. The dread in his belly had turned to fire. "This was a very, very poor one. I will give you one last chance. Turn away, right now, and I will let this slide."

"We do not have to fear your sort!" Another alien, green with tattoos etched on her face, held up a bagel as she growled out the words. "Your cult will be wiped out, just like the others."

*Oh, wee lass.* Purple-white energy traced along the extended fingers, a reaction so natural that it almost seemed to come up without his bidding. *You stupid, brain-dead wee lass.*

"Until every cage is broken!" The green-skinned alien shrieked, pitching her bagel. The bread bounced off of Bentre's right shoulder with a barely-audible thump. Letting loose a guttural growl, Bentre released the floating object from his hold via the Force. He allowed it to drop to the pavement. Dropping his right arm at the same time, he pulled his left arm up, extended away from his side and level with his chest. Holding his hand in a half-closed position, he summoned his lightsaber to hand by the sheer force of his will, thumbing the ignition switch with his metallic thumb as it struck his palm and bringing the icy-blue energy blade to life.

There was a measure of uncertainty in the faces of those who formed this strange gang of humanoids. He felt a tremor of dread, of delicious fear ripple out in the Force. "Oh come on now," the native, Corellian accent of his youth began to assert itself. "Don't tell me, you all're afraid of a wee scrap?" A barking laugh escaped his lips as he drew one foot back, falling into the familiar stance of Shii-Cho.

"We will not be afraid!" Another of the gang cried, prompting a hail of bagels. Habit took over in that moment. With a mix of training and the Force, Bentre cut through quite a few of the odd projectiles. The group began to fall back as another sizzling, bisected bagel portion hit the street behind the Battelord.

"Ye better run. Wouldn't want the big, bad Sadowan to catch ye, eh?" Chuckling to himself as another parting bagel fell short of him, Stahoes started to fish around in his pocket. Pulling a commlink up to his mouth, he thumbed the switch on the side. "Hey, Ashia. I hope ye are not too busy jus' now." He did not even try to suppress the accent, even as he spoke to his second in command.

*There is just something entirely too humorous to all this.*

"I really hope you have some good news for us, Ben." Her tone was far from patient, but the state of the Clan was of the greatest concern to them both. Such things could be forgiven. "I don't want to consider a straight fight with the Collective fleets yet."

Bentre chuckled, falling back into his normally, effected persona. "I can't offer you much in that way. This meeting did not turn out quite as expected, yet. Also, it looks like somebody has been spreading word of our deeds on the Smuggler's Moon. I was about to chase after some kids who seem to have some connection to the Collective, methinks. Wondered if you might have some of the kids who would like to tag along as they get rounded up."

There was silence on the other side of the line. "I am sure we can put a group or two of our Sadowans."

"Hey, sounds like a plan!" Stahoes waved his still-lit lightsaber in the air enthusiastically. "I look forward to meeting up with them. Might want to tell them to hurry, though. It looks like this fun might come to a rather bloody, abrupt stop if I have much to say about it."

There was another pause, this one conveying silent irritation. Bentre took an odd enjoyment out of these exchanges. His mirth was stoked by the three word response that followed. "Affirmative. Ashia, out."

*At least tonight will not be all bad, now.* He always took pleasure in the hunt. It was rare that prey offered itself so readily to the chase.

The Clan was in a rough spot. There was no arguing against this. He might have gained, or might have lost an ally with his negotiations. This was his particular lot in life. He could not control the situation without exerting a great deal of effort. He could not feel certain of his success, and so he would report to the Grand Master and the Dark Council.

It did not matter as much as he might angst about matters. One failure was not the end of their reformed Sadowan Empire. The Consul-Commander would catch one of these wee little pigs, spouting the nonsense that came from the Collective propoganda machine. He would exert the amount of pain necessary to extract the truth. If they were a potential leak to the enemy of the Brotherhood, they would be silenced. In the big scheme of things, it would be a simple matter.

*Though hopefully they are not part of this negotiating party. That would be a headache I don't care to deal with.* Stalking forward, the Sith deactivated his lightsaber and opened his senses to the Force. *The hunt is on.*