

Lucine sat in the breakroom of the 40th Street Medical Clinic with her eyes closed and her head tilted back. Estle City was awash in fear, hatred and pain. You could almost taste it, like the tang of salt in the air by the sea.

Her datapad lay on the table in front of her. The interface displayed a map of the city, with active riots highlighted in red marks. The whole map was awash in red. For weeks, Estle City had been a powder keg, and someone had finally put a match to it.

It was obvious that this was all a calculated attempt to destroy the Arconan foothold on the city. Someone, or a group of people, had neatly taken advantage of the chaos of the plague to turn the populace into rabid, bloodthirsty beasts. The level of manipulation to accomplish such a feat was impressive, really.

But despite the fact that she was impressed, Lucine was not about to sit aside and watch the city burn. It would upset too many of her plans. Besides, she was not about to be outdone by some shadowy manipulator who could somehow make massive moves without attracting suspicion. No, it was time for her to enter the fray.

She tapped on the interface and opened her list of contacts. It was time to call in some favors.

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Jas Tamrick leaned back in his chair and tipped the bottle of wine to his lips. His shift was over, and ordinarily he would have gone home for a few drinks before turning in. But it seemed something big was going on. Mobs were roaming the street, causing trouble and worse for anyone they accused of 'working for the Citadel'. Furthermore, it seemed like half the city was on fire.

It had only taken a brief look around for him to decide that the safest move would be to dip into the secret stash hidden in the drawer of his desk, and bed down in his office in Sinchi Logistics Hub 12. The portly foreman yawned cavernously and leaned back further in his chair. It wasn't the greatest setup, but it would have to do.

He had just begun to doze when his comm went off. He opened one eye just wide enough to pick it up. "Talk to me," he said into the device.

"Jas, darling!"

"You!" The familiar voice immediately caused his pleasant, alcohol-induced haze to vanish. He jerked forward in his chair, sitting up straight and alert even though he knew it was impossible for her to see him.

“Yes, me,” Lucine replied agreeably. “I do believe it is time for you to repay that little favor.”

Jas pressed his thick lips into a line. It had seemed like such a good deal at the time. The redhead had approached him, offering to clear his gambling debts in exchange for an unnamed favor in the future. He should have known she would come to collect eventually. “Whaddya want?”

“Taped underneath your desk is an envelope containing a data chip. All you need to do is to install the program on the chip onto fifteen of the Hub droids. That is all.”

Jas’s mouth went dry. As the head of maintenance for the variety of droids that worked within the Hub, it would be a simple task. It was also one that would cost him his job if he was discovered. “What’s it do?”

“Oh, it is just a simple set of instructions for a very special delivery I have in mind,” the redhead’s replied. “Do not worry, darling. The droids will only be interacting with cargo that I have ordered, and once they have carried out the program they will return to their normal duties.”

“I dunno,” the foreman said nervously. “I’m not sure I like the sound of this.”

“It does not matter if you like it or not, darling.” Lucine’s voice had taken on an edge of steel. “You owe me, and you will repay the favor. If not, I think you will find that my wrath is much worse than that of some two-bit loan shark.

Jas whet his lips and opened his mouth to tell her to kark off. But before he could speak, he remembered the look in her eyes when he had first agreed to her offer. Her smile had been pretty enough, but the icy look in her eyes had chilled him to his soul. It was the look of a killer, and had almost been enough to make him call off the deal right there. But fear of the loan sharks had spurred him forward.

A killer, Jas thought as he felt a shudder run through him. He didn’t doubt that the redhead was capable of carrying out her threat. Hells, I might have been safer with the loan sharks. But there was no going back now. “Yeah,” he said at last. He felt underneath his desk until he found the envelope she had mention. “Yeah, all right. I’ll do it.”

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Ara Trevlis glanced nervously up at the heavy clouds that hung low over Estle City, before double checking her sensor array. “This is nuts,” she muttered as she flipped switches and

inspected displays as part of her pre-launch routine. “Karking nuts. I’m gonna get shot down for sure.”

She paused and stared at the columns of smoke that rose from the city in a thick, black column. Things in the city were really bad. Maybe the safest place for her would be in the air; it sure beat getting torn apart by a rabid mob.

She’d seen it happen to one of those Expeditionary Force soldiers, a young kid who looked to be just out of training. Fresh-faced, probably too young to even grow a beard. He’d never had a chance once the crowd surrounded him. She could still hear the screams as the kid was dying. And then after, what the crowd had done with the body? Ara shuddered at the memory.

The sound of an approaching repulsor-lift distracted her from her thoughts, and she gratefully seized upon the distraction. She turned to see two people sitting behind the controls of the approaching lift. One was a green female Twi’lek, whose face seemed to be permanently set in a scowl. The one driving the lift was a slender Human male who was probably a few years older than the soldier Ara had just been thinking about. Both of them wore uniforms that identified them as Estle City Desalination Plant workers.

“Hey! I’m guessing you’re the person we’re supposed to drop this off to, considering the fact that you’re the only one here,” the man said brightly. He brought the repulsor-lift to a stop and jumped out. “What’re you gonna do with it? Make a metric ton of ice cream?”

Ara gave the kid a blank look, and the young man flushed red. “You know... because you need salt to make ice cream? And we’ve got a lot of salt here? Get it?”

“She got it, Bram. Quit beating a dead bantha,” the stern-faced Twi’lek said in a deadpan voice.

“Oh, come on, it was funny,” Bram said in a sulky tone.

“It really wasn’t,” the woman said as she climbed out of repulsor-lift, before turning her attention back to Ara. “I’m Katra, and the comedian is Bram. You expecting a delivery?”

“Uhh, yeah,” Ara said slowly. “Salt?”

“That’s right! The highest quality sodium chloride, compliments of the Estle City Desalination Plant!” Bram said as he patted one of the crates affectionately.

Katra sighed and rolled her eyes. “Sorry about him. He really loves his work.”

“It shows,” Ara replied as she reached back to nervously rub the back of her neck.

“Wonderful. Well, now that we know that we’re where we’re supposed to be, let’s get this unloaded. We still have two more loads back at the plant to bring out,” Katra said in a brisk tone. “You want this dropped in your cargo hold?”

Three full payloads? Of salt? Gradually, understanding began to dawn in Ara’s mind. She glanced once more at the heavy clouds that hung over Estle City.

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Randolf Rem stood upon the catwalk and looked over his assembled flock with pride. They milled below, talking quietly amongst themselves or taking a few minutes of silent meditation before the start of the service. Randolf could almost taste their fear. Violence had overtaken the city, and it was times like this that the faith of even the true believers was tested. But they would persevere because they had the protection of the Lady of the Night.

He closed his eyes as he considered the sermon he had prepared. It was designed specifically to inspire faith and courage in the faithful, a stirring bit of oration that would uplift and awe. Truly, the Lady had been with him when he had sat down to write it.

But his meditations were interrupted by an alert from his comm. He frowned at the sound of the alert. Who would dare to disturb him at this crucial time? His frown deepened when he retrieved the device from his robes and saw that it was their patron who wished to speak with him. She did not contact him frequently, but he knew better than to ignore her summons. He pressed the button to receive the transmission and spoke quietly into the comm. “My lady.”

“Rem. It is time.”

A shudder ran down down his spine at his words. “Are you certain? The city—”

“The common people seek to destroy The Lady’s great work, Rem. Would you allow the paradise She created to go up in flames due to the ignorance of those who do not understand Her light?”

The portly priest swallowed hard. The redhead’s words cut him to the quick. “I... no.”

“Then you know what you must do. The tools of reckoning will arrive shortly. Take them to the Citadel and put them to use.”

The connection abruptly cut off, leaving Rem to his thoughts. He pressed his lips together as he considered the implications of the task that had been set before him. He knew what he had to do, but the task still daunted him. But he dared not refuse. After all, it was his benefactor who

ensured that the demolitions proposals did not go into effect. Were it not for her, with her bribes and machinations, Foundry 5 would have been demolished ages ago. Without his support, there would be no place for his flock to worship.

His thoughts raced as he reconsidered his sermon as he slowly maneuvered his bulk down the ladder into the bowels of Foundry 5. It was time.

He stepped upon the dais in front of the turbolift which served as a shrine to their Lady and gazed at those who were assembled. His children. His flock. The true believers. As he looked upon his congregation, his thoughts cleared. The jumbled pieces of a sermon seemed to fall into place, and he knew what he was going to say. Truly, the Lady had inspired him.

“My children! The time of reckoning has at last come!” he said, the ringing tones of his tenor voice reaching even those in the back of the room. “For too long, we have hidden in the shadows, content to see to our faith and leave the matters of the world to others. But this, we can no longer do!”

“Foul Tur’bolyft has stirred! Through his machinations, he has corrupted the hearts and minds of the unbelievers, and inspired them to commit horrific sin and terrible violence upon the city of Our Great Lady! He seeks to destroy Her paradise, to extinguish Her light from this world! As Her Children, we must not allow this to stand!”

The crowd before him stirred, restless at the thought of Tur’bolyft doing further harm to their Beloved Lady.

“These unhappy rebels have risen up against the Citadel, and seek to make war upon its servants. They seek to undo everything She has built. These ungrateful wretches seek to destroy the peace and prosperity She has wrought, and to cast this city under the shadow of Tur’bolyft! To cast our friends, family and neighbors into the bondage of tyranny, oppression and unenlightenment!”

A quiet murmur spread through the crowd as outrage began to spread.

“They have chosen the darkness, and now we too must join the fray! To shine Her light throughout the city, to burn those who have given their hearts to foul Tur’bolyft! To cast out the shadows of oppression and ignorance! Because, my children, if we sit idly by while the unbelievers do this, then we aid them in their cause just as assuredly as if we had taken up arms with them!”

He could see their eyes alight with the fire of belief. The murmured voices had risen; the assembled flock now buzzed with anticipation and certainty in what they must do. And, below the voices of the crowd, he could hear the sound of an approaching repulsorlift.

“Fear not, my children! She watches over us all, and will deliver us safely! Know that we will not seek to take up arms against them, for that is not Her way! Instead, we will extend our hand in friendship, to slow their onslaught while She gathers the will and the power to rain her righteous fury upon the unclean! Those who are not pure in their hearts and minds will be stricken from this good earth, to never again wreck their heresy upon the innocent!”

As if on cue, three repulsorlifts trundled into the foundry, each laden with heavy barrels and kegs. Each one bore the stamp of a laughing Ryn’s face, and were labeled as the ‘Birdrat’s Final Solution’.

“Behold the tools of our resistance!” Rem shouted as he gestured toward the repulsorlifts and the Logistics Hub droid that drove them. “With this holy Vasaarian brandy, we shall prevail! Drink easy, my children, and know that She shall extend her hand to protect you! And now, let us go forth, and carry Her light into the city! For Our Lady!”

As he lifted his fist, the crowd roared in response. Cheers and cries to purge the unbelievers filled the air. Rem looked out among his flock and noted their flushed faces with pride. Tonight, they would make the Lady proud.

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Ara could not help but to breathe a sigh of relief as her modified T-47 Airspeeder lifted above the clouds. To the east, she could see the sun sinking below the horizon. Below her, the burning city was obscured by a thick carpet of clouds.

This is where I am supposed to be, she thought dreamily as she double checked the coordinates and brought her bird around. The only time she felt truly alive was when she was in the air; nothing else mattered to her.

A light flashed on her display indicated she was above the required coordinates. Ara flipped a few more switches, before resting her hand lovingly on the console. “Once I do this, you’ll be all mine,” she said aloud. “Just one last job.”

As she tapped a few buttons on the display and listened as the cargo bay doors opened. As she flew along the indicated route, glistening white powder began to pour from the bay and into the clouds below.

As the salt poured into the clouds, condensation rapidly increased. Minutes later, the sky was split with a bolt of lightning, followed shortly by a deafening crack of thunder. Then the rain began to pour down.

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Sasalea Pele had never felt so alive. Their impromptu command center, set up in an old warehouse in the Sinchi Ring, was a hotbed of activity. The general mood was one of grim anticipation, as men and women readied weapons and prepared themselves for the final assault. Messengers poured in from all parts of the city, bringing reports from the active fronts. And they brought them to him. Lea exalted at the fact grown men and women were looking to him for leadership and guidance. This was his time.

He looked up from his map in time to see Misha arrive. The younger boy was soaked to the bone and wore a troubled expression on his face.

“How’re things at the Citadel?” Lea asked by way of greeting as Misha drew nearer.

“Good and bad,” the younger boy replied. “The advance team made it into the courtyard, but this rain is causing us some serious issues. I’ve never seen anything like it! I guess a lot of people are going home because of it.”

Lea froze. “People are leaving? Why?”

“I mean, it’s mostly people that are only half-hearted about the cause. I talked to Jonas before he left, and he said that we’ve done enough for the day. The Citadel’s gotten the message that we’re not messing around, and that should be enough for right now.”

Lea swallowed hard, his thoughts racing. “How many are left?”

“A lot. 75% of them, maybe? But they could use a hand.”

Lea nodded. “All right. We’ll form up and—“

“SASALEA PELE!”

A familiar voice cut through the crowd, drawing all eyes to it. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Lea also turned to look. Standing in front of the open doorway was his mother. Her eyes blazed with fury, and her arms were crossed tightly in front of her, which she only did when she was well and truly karked off. “M-mom...” Lea said weakly in the face of his mother’s fury.

“Just what are you playing at, young man?” she demanded, heedless of the stares she was getting from the other members of the resistance.

“We’re not playing, Mom,” Lea replied, finding his voice at last. “It’s time. We’re ending the Citadel once and for all.” He glanced nervously around. He had personally recruited most of the people present and knew them to be very much against the Citadel. Hard-bitten men and women who were willing to commit violence and bloodshed to do the right thing. But if his mom started spouting off her nonsense about how the Citadel was there to protect them, he was not sure what they would do.

It was then that he noticed movement at his mother’s side. Ever stood hiding behind her legs, staring off into space at something only she could see. Her hand was limp in her mother’s grasp. “You brought her here? Are you insane?”

“Do you have any idea what’s going on out there, Sasalea? Those people are looting houses! Your people! I just watched three people kick in the door of Mrs. Marco’s house! I heard the screams, Gods only know what they did to her. At least I can protect her if she’s with me!” Mom blazed. She paused and took a deep breath as she tried to master herself. “Please, Lea. Come home. I need your help with Ever. She’s not well, you know she’s not well. Please stop this foolishness.”

Why? Why can’t anyone but me see how important it is that the Citadel be destroyed? “This is not foolishness! We’re fighting to throw off our oppressors!” Lea exploded.

“Oppressors? Lea, see sense! The Citadel—“

“No,” Lea cut in before his mother had a chance to say anymore. “No more.” He glanced at a hulking Besalisk who stood with both sets of arms crossed over his chest. “Groy. Lock her and Ever in the storeroom.”

His words, stated in a deadly calm tone, caused his mother to freeze. “Lea…”

“I’m sorry, Mom, but it’s the only way. You’ve always wanted me to be the man of the house, and the man always knows best. It’s not safe for you to walk home, so you can stay here until the fighting is done. Then you’ll see that I was right all along.” Lea spoke firmly as he looked his mother square in the eye, secure in his convictions that he was doing the right thing. But he could not bring himself to drop his gaze to his sister’s face. “We’ll talk more when this is over.”

He turned his back and stared once more at the map of the Citadel. He turned his attention to his own thoughts to drown out his mother’s screams and pleas, and the sounds of the struggle taking place behind him. I can’t be soft. I have to be a man. I have to be a hero, just like all those guys in the holovids. She’ll see I’m right when this is over.

“Misha,” he said at last. “Round everyone up. We’ll go and help out at the Citadel. It’s time to end this.”

Misha did not answer. Lea turned to see his friend staring down at his communicator with a troubled look on his face. "Misha?"

"Huh? Oh... oh yeah! All right!" Misha said as he was snapped out of his reverie. "We'll do it!"

The rain pelted down upon them as they trudged through the deserted streets of Estle City. It fell in huge, fat drops that stung as they fell. Lea shielded his eyes as he stared up at the darkened sky. I've never seen rain like this. In a way, it was a benefit. It had put out many of the fires and had driven everyone off the streets.

As a result, they made it to the Citadel in record time. They arrived to find the gate had been battered down and lay in pieces around the main opening. The signs of fighting were apparent within the courtyard, and the main doors hung open. "They got in!" Lea cried triumphantly.

But the scene he found when he crossed the threshold was unexpected. The atmosphere was more like a party. People he knew from the rebellion milled about, drinking from a large barrel that was stamped with a picture of a laughing Ryn. He could tell by their movements that some of them were quite drunk.

"Wh-what's going on?" Lea demanded.

"Ohhh, hey, Lea!" slurred Rask. He was a heavysset man who had spent most of his life working at Foundry 3; the broadness of his arms was almost as impressive as the size of his gut. He had 'borrowed' Mando armor for the attack, but he had removed the helmet. It now rested, skewed, atop his head. "Those-those karkers 're holed up in the inner bailey. Place's locked up tight, ain't n'way we're getting in there. We're waitin' for reinforcements when these guys showed up. Figured we deserved a break." He grinned and held out a glass of amber liquid to him. "Want some? 'S proolly the best stuff I ever had!"

"Have you gone nuts? We're fighting a war here!" Lea said as he glared up at the man. He then glanced over his shoulder at Meranda, a stern-faced Togruta. "Go see what's going on."

She slipped out of the room and returned a few minutes later. "Rask's right, unfortunately. They've got fortified positions inside the inner bailey. Looks like- they're planning to make a last stand there."

"How many?" Lea asked numbly.

"More than we got," Meranda said with a shrug.

Lea felt like he could burst into tears. So close. They had been so close! They'd driven back the enemy and nearly broken them. But now, there was no way they could win. Not with so many of their number incapacitated. "Are you stupid?" he demanded as he lashed out, knocking the cup from Rask's hand.

"Heyyy, kid, simmer down," Rask said. "We've been workin' hard ou'here. We got thirsty."

Anger burned within Lea as he glared at the portly, flush-faced man. "I won't simmer down! I won't! Can't you see that you've ruined everything?"

Rask's jovial features creased with a frown. "Seemed like a good idea at th'time," he said with a shrug. He then realized who he was talking to, and narrowed his small eyes at Lea. "S'r'sly, kid, calm down. No need t'throw a tantrum."

"You idiot!" Lea yelled, even as he suppressed the urge to stamp his foot. "You karking idiot!" Acting on impulse, he closed his hand into a fist and punched Rask in the gut.

The older man glanced down, protected from the blow by the fat in his belly and his blood alcohol level. He scowled, his hands forming into huge, meaty fists. "Stupid kid!" he growled as he lashed out, punching him squarely in the nose.

Lea grunted as he felt cartilage crunch beneath Rask's huge fist. Stars exploded in front of his eyes, and he felt hot blood dripping down his face. Over the ringing in his ears, he could hear Rask shouting. "I might b' a idiot, but a' least I'm not some stupid spoiled karkin' kid with 'is head stuck up his ass! Oh, boo hoo, yer life's so hard! Quit cryin' an' grow up, punk!"

Through his blurred vision, Lea could see Rask raise his fist to land another punch. But before he could let it fly, he paused, a look of surprise on his face. Abruptly, the portly man doubled over, retching loudly. But there was something wrong. The stuff that was coming out of his mouth was the color of blood.

Lea hastily scrubbed the tears from his eyes and forced himself to take a look. All around him, those who had been drinking were starting to look pale. More than a few were doubled over, much like Rask, blood and mucus pouring from their mouths.

"Wh-what?" he gasped as he took in the carnage.

The sound of a discharging slugthrower made him jump, and beside him, Meranda grunted. She collapsed onto the floor, and Lea was horrified to see that the slug had passed through her head just above her eyes, spraying blood and brains along the wall behind her.

"Now, my children!" a heavysset man cried as he aimed his slugthrower once more. "Purge the unbelievers! For Our Lady!"

“For Our Lady!” came the cry. Lea realized that he had been so focused on Rask that he hadn’t noticed that he did not recognize some of the assembled people. Without hesitation, these strangers drew hidden weapons and laid into his friends without mercy.

“The attack came without warning, and few were able to defend themselves. Lea could only watch in horror as he watched his friends fall, one after another. It took a few moments for him to remember that he had a weapon. He pulled the blaster from its holster with shaking hands and took aim at the attacker nearest him.

“Lea!” Dimly, he was aware of someone shouting his name and yanking on his arm. He allowed himself to be pulled out of the door, even as the blaster bolts and slugs flew all around him.

Misha kept a firm grip on his arm as he pulled him through the courtyard and past the main gate. “We gotta get out of here!” he shouted over the driving rain. But Lea was too numb to speak.

The streets passed in a blur as Lea stumbled after Misha. He had no idea if anyone else had made it out. He had no idea what had happened. Everything had fallen apart. How could this have happened?

At last, they stumbled back into the warehouse. As Lea stood just inside the threshold, shivering and numb, he realized that he was still holding the blaster in his hands. He allowed it to slip from between his trembling fingers and it fell to the floor with a clatter.

“Come on,” Misha said, as he pulled him deeper into the dark, deserted warehouse. It was then that Lea saw his mother, sitting next to the rickety table that held his maps. Ever sat in her lap, staring dreamily at nothing. When his mother saw him, she glared and pulled the girl closer to her chest, as if protecting her from him.

“Mom...” Lea said hesitantly. Words flooded his mind, so many things he wanted to say. But his mother merely turned her eyes away from him.

“I am afraid she is rather cross with you at the moment, darling.”

Lea whirled to see a redheaded woman standing behind him. He gasped and jumped backward his hand instinctively going to the now-empty holster. “Who are you?”

“Well, I would say that I am a friend, but we both know that is not true,” the woman replied with a smile that did not quite reach her eyes. “But I have been looking for you for a very long time. And now that I have found you, we are going to become friends. Very close friends.”