

A shower of electric embers rained down from up high, pattering harmlessly against the *Esperanza's* durasteel skin. Clangs and bangs of hydrotools echoed around the hangar space and strings of curses flew between mechanics like greetings as they worked through their check-lists.

The repair berths at Port Ol'val had never been a particularly sophisticated affair, but the recent turmoil had seen them turned into a virtual warzone before the Blindman had managed to wrestle control of the operation back into Arcona's opaque hands. The Shadow Port had slowly been coming back on line and regular services resumed, though replacing the half-decent mechanics had taken some creative coercion to pull off.

Thankfully, Yumni Ha was nothing if not creative. At least when it came to satisfying demands with supply.

Standing behind a thin railing overlooking the repairs on her ship, the Kaminoan trader observed the operation of the port as a whole. Her celestial eyes shifted effortlessly from post to post, following the flow of men and material as the workers attended to various models of spacecraft and effected whatever repairs or modifications their masters had paid for. At each juncture, choke point or crossing, she made a note of the obstruction and marked it down on a datapad at her side, making a list for the shift overseers to rectify post-haste. Inefficiency was a thing she could not abide and she could tell just by the sound of it that this place was operating at barely half steam.

It was while deep in the agreeable flow-state of work that a robed figure approached her from a blind angle, appearing as if from nowhere at her side with a soft greeting. The sound was enough to make her jolt ever so minutely, a rather severe reaction from one of her kind.

"Good day, madam Ha. I would hope to exchange a few words with you, if you are not too busy," the mysterious man stated.

"Of course," Yumni replied hastily, putting the datapad away and turning to look at the rather unassuming male whose features were mostly hidden behind a hood from the angle she was looking at. "How may we be of assistance?"

"I represent a rather major player in the local – *acquisitions* business and I would like to forward you an invitation from my masters for some co-operation," he explained. "Rest assured, any and all shipments made will be handsomely rewarded."

Had she been a more fresh-faced trader, Yumni might have taken this opportunity hook, line and sinker. But she was not and it instead raised a whole host of questions in her mind, the chief of which was the fact she already knew the major players and none ought to have any desire to operate quite like this.

"Intriguing," she replied dryly, as if such emotion could be distinguished from her tonelessly courteous voice. "I understand that a degree of subtlety is required at times in our line of

work, but I would like to inquire further into *whom* it is you are representing. I already have contacts with the major players,” she assured him.

“Not this one,” the male replied, the smug grin on his face self-evident from his tone. Reaching into the folds of his cloak, the man presented a card held between middle and index fingers, offering it to her.

As she reached to accept it, silver flashed off the single word written upon its carbon black surface; *Shroud*.

The weight of the cardboard was heavy, the choice of material already unique enough to warrant interest in a world choked with flimsiplast. Besides the name, written in laser-etched blocky aurebesh, there was nothing on the card. Well, next to nothing, as a small diagram had been drawn on the reverse, black on black and only perceptible upon touching the recessed grooves.

Running her fingers over it, Yumni painted the image in her mind, tracing the points and lines until the pattern became clear. The cypher was old, but in common use at the time of the Clone Wars, and the navigational pulsars would have been a dead giveaway even to someone who’d never even heard of it. It was a map, or an address at the very least.

“My employers will await your decision, madam Ha, though if I may be so bold, you might wish to make your choice with the greatest possible expediency, the dermal neuro-toxin is slow-acting but quite lethal unless the correct antidote is administered within thirty six hours. Luckily, they’re having a sale at... well, you already know the place,” the man stated with no small amount of sadistic delight before turning around and leaving.

Yumni was left speechless, trying to sense if the man’s words had been true, or if the faint numbness in her fingertips was merely a case of his bluff. Punching the coordinates into her datapad, she verified what she’d already surmised by touch and mental gymnastics alone. The card was pointing her towards the Antei Nebula.

If there was one thing the Kaminoan loathed more than inefficiency, it was having her hand forced, but as the numbness continued to spread, she knew she had little option but to indulge the venomous invitation and meet with whomever the smug bastard was working for...