

“So what is the next step of your plan?” Ceyra Ky’Lian nervously queried her rescuer.

As Jiq Morvit navigated the woman he saved through the streets of Chyron’s Taldryan Sector, he was very certain that she wasn’t going to like the answer. From the moment he decided to save her from her brother’s coup, Jiq knew that getting Ceyra to safety meant getting her into the hands of Clan Taldryan. Seeing as most of their members were likely found on their ships, and that the two of them currently had no means of getting off planet on their own, they had to find at least one Clan member planetside. Jiq didn’t have the exact location on any of them at the moment but he had a hunch on the location certain Aleena he had worked with in the past.

“We are going to try to find Justinios Drake.”

Ceyra halted and pulled Jiq firmly by the arm into a nearby alleyway. “What do you mean ‘try to find’?” Her tone went from nervous to biting in an instant. “You said earlier that you were working with Justinios Drake and now you do not know where he is?”

Jiq expected this exact response and had one of his own prepared. “The Clan has been out of the system for some time and even if they had been here I didn’t exactly have time to put saving your skin out to committee vote. I acted, you lived. The specifics of who knows what is irrelevant.”

“I understand. I’m sorry.” Ceyra let go of Jiq’s arm and fell in behind the security office as they exited the alleyway.

The rest of their travel through the streets of the Taldryan sector provided no further conversation. As the duo silently made their way through the bustling streets, intentionally taking the most congested routes possible in order to use the crowds as camouflage, they arrived at the location Jiq very much hoped would contain Justinios Drake.

“What makes you...” Ceyra stopped herself and adjusted her tone. “You believe that master Drake will be at this restaurant?”

“If he’s on Chyron he’s here or has been here recently,” Jiq smirked. “I know because he owns the place and it is dinner time.”

Ceyra entered first as Jiq’s insistence and once inside the pair found themselves in what seemed to be a fairly high end restaurant. The walls were all painted a pleasant shade of off-white with paintings that looked as if they were from local artists lining the wall. The flooring seemed to be some sort of natural wood planks and the tones of an opera could subtly be heard over the muted din of conversation. Crystal chandeliers were dimmed to a low light setting, creating a very private environment for each table even though they were all packed fairly close together.

“We’ve lucked out, that’s him in the back,” Jiq said pointing to a large booth at the rear of the dining room at which sat both Justinios and his companion. “I will warn you, Justinios can be a bit odd but he’ll keep us safe.”

“Even against my brother? He’s become some sort of a monster.” Jiq noticed that the mention of her brother made Ceyra very anxious and not the angry version of anxious he saw back on the streets. This version of anxiety was when some feared not just for themselves, but for someone they loved.

“I’ve seen Justinios in action and all I can say is that if you brother wants a piece of that he’s gone even crazier than I thought.”

Before Jiq could walk over to the attendant at the front of the restaurant to plead his back to Justinios, a familiar KX-series droid stepped in their path. “Officer Morvit, as soon as I had heard that Cerya had gone missing I immediately advised master Drake that you were 87.43 percent responsible for her disappearance.”

“And the other 12.57 percent?” Jiq asked. He was curious on what other scenarios the droids tactically inclined brain had thought up.

“My analysis indicated that there was a 10.34 percent chance her escape was a ruse to draw out members of Clan Taldryan into a trap, a 2.12 percent chance that Cerya escaped on her own...”

“Wow, offended,” Cerya interrupted.

The droid continued unabated, “...and a 0.11 percent chance she fell into a wrinkle in space-time which is unexplainable by our current understanding of the Universe.”

“That last one sounds interesting, can you tell us more about it?” Jiq asked the droid.

“Belay that order, droid. Take us to you master now, we are not safe here.” Ceyra’s background as the daughter of a Chancellor was on full display as she took on the demeanor and the tone of someone used to giving commands.

The droid sighed and pulsed the illumination of his photoreceptors in what Jiq thought the automaton intended to mimic an eye roll. “You may refer to me by my name, Kilo. Despite your ill-advised rudeness, master Drake is very intent on meeting with so I will take you to him.”

All three of them made their way past tables full of happy patrons towards the waiting booth in the rear of the restaurant. Cerya was the first to speak, clearly still chafing at being dressed down by a droid and not wanting to concede any standing to Kilo or her rescuer.

“Honorable Justinios Drake, I implore you to assist us in this time of need.” As she spoke in a highly diplomatic tone she reached down and grabbed the hand of the Zabrak, who Jiq did not recall meeting at any point in the past. This caused everyone around her, even Kilo, to burst into raucous laughter.

The Aleena, also known by Jiq as the real Justinios Drake, spoke through his laughter. “Yes oh wise and powerful Justinios Drake,” he paused to grab the Zabrak’s other hand, “please help these souls in their hour of need. Only your strength and wisdom can save them!”

This elicited a resurgence in the laughter as Cerya’s embarrassment turned to anger. She threw the Zabrak’s hand back down onto the table as the Aleena followed suit with the one that had been in his clutch. The Aleena was spoke again as everyone regained some level of composure.

“Jiq I assume that since this is Cerya Ky’Lian standing in front of me that I am not going to get to taste my meal, am I?”

The former security officer shook his head to indicate that was not likely to happen as Cerya chimed in again.

“Wait, you are Justinios Drake?” directing her question to the blue skinned alien.

Justinios looked the human female in the eyes and responded. “Yes and I apologize for having a chuckle at your expense but I just couldn’t help myself.”

Cerya looked as if she was caught between competing feelings. Not surprising as not only was she just presented with a savior that clearly didn’t fit her expectations but then he immediately had embarrassed the fallen noble in front of others. “Yes and I do not mean to be ungrateful for your assistance but Officer Morvit assured me that you could keep us safe from my brother and his forces.”

“You can’t always judge the value of a parcel by its size, Ms. Ky’Lian. Obviously I’ll have to figure out how to get you off of Chyron so let’s have a strategy session in the back office.” Justinios paused for a moment furrowing his brow in through. After a few moments passed, he then whipped out his data pad, his reptilian fingers tapping furiously. “Never mind I’ve figured it all out. Let’s finish dinner in the private room instead.”

Rising from the table, Justinios guided the party to the private party room in the far left corner of the restaurant, opposite the bar. Two doors slid silently apart to reveal a dining area furnished identically to the main dining room. Jiq surmised that although the doors had a wood grain finish that they were durasteel underneath. As a security expert Jiq was aware that this was likely a selling point for those looking to have a private party that could also fortify itself if need be. In fact, he had also noticed that most of patrons in the restaurant had a very military feel to them

and strongly suspected that Justinios' core clientele was off-duty members of Taldryan's armed forces.

"I'm going to go get changed." The Zabrak said to Justinios as he the group entered the party room.

"Good call," the Aleena responded to his... partner? Guardian? Jiq still wasn't sure what role the Zabrak played. "No transmissions to the fleet though. Let's try to keep the element of surprise as long as we can. What do you two want?" Justinios asked, turning his attention back Jiq and his charge. "And don't tell me we don't have the time, there's always time for a good meal."

While Jiq fully enjoyed his own meal, especially seeing as it was food he couldn't afford on his salary, the former security officer noticed that his companion hadn't even touched her plate. In an attempt to break the awkward silence that had arisen since Justinios' Zabrak friend left, he asked about the restaurant itself. "I had heard you opened a place like this, how does someone like yourself get into fine dining?"

"I just put up a small sum of credits to get the place going, the head chef is the brains behind the operation. She's a local girl and as soon as I had tasted what she was selling as a street vendor I knew she needed her own place." The Aleena placed his fork and knife down on the white ceramic plate, adding his napkin to the mix shortly thereafter. "Not another bite or I'll explode. Cerya is your dish not to your liking? I'd be happy to order you a new one."

The Ky'Lian's temper exploded, although she "yelled" at Justinios through gritted teeth as a mother might do to a child in a public setting. "My dish? My dish? Who cares about my kriffing dish when my crazed brother is out there murdering people and doing god knows what else? We need to go over this plan of yours now!"

"We," Justinios said with emphasis as he used his hands to gesture at the entire table, "don't need to go over anything."

Cerya did not look amused by the response and went to continue her protest before Justinios cut it off.

"But since I am a nice Aleena I will go over the plan. Are you ready?"

"Yes," the human responded.

"Ok, but are you really, truly ready? We can't have any mistakes here." The Aleena had a look on his face that Jiq was pretty sure meant he was once again messing with Cerya. Looking over

at her Jiq was also pretty sure she wasn't yet aware of it because she looked like she was about to go supernova.

"I am *kriffing* ready you impetuous little freak of nature."

Smirking, Justinios ignored the insult. "So our droids went and to go get our ship. They are going to fly it here and then," he paused, "we're going to get on it."

Cerya's demeanor calmed a bit, content with the initial response. "Ok good start, and then?"

Visibly confused, Justinios responded, "Well I suppose we fly it to the Taldryan fleet?"

The supernova occurred.

"You arrogant little fool. I will not sit here while you play games with my life and the lives of my people. This half-cocked plan of yours is hardly useful and you clearly haven't made contingency plans for the myriad things that could go wrong." The younger Ky'Lian was clearly flabbergasted with Justinios' carefree approach to planning, something Jiq had already seen and expected before walking through the door. "What if the ship come under fire before they arrive here? Or after? What if troops walk through that door right now? What if my brother does?"

"I'll deal with it."

"But what if..."

Justinios locked eyes with Cerya, all manner of joking gone from his tone. "I will deal with any of it. You have to trust me that I do my best work in the moment. Do not mistake my pleasant demeanor for lack of skill Ms. Ky'Lian. I have seen war, I have seen death. Just as Commander Martel has."

At that moment the Zabrak, who Jiq assumed was the aforementioned Commander Martel, re-entered the office. Everything he projected was the opposite of Justinios Drake. Fully clad in crimson armor with overlapping plates, the Commander was armed to the literal teeth. Cerya took notice of the well-armed soldier as well.

"Now this is someone who I believe could get me out of here alive." The comment was laced with venom, clearly directed at Justinios.

To his credit, the reptilian alien took the barb in stride. He calmly plucked a small cylindrical object from beneath his robes. Jiq couldn't recall exactly but he felt that the weapon looked different from the last time he was in combat with Justinios. He had heard that the Aleena had received multiple honors since their last meeting and it was possible this was one of them.

Justinios' tiny blue hand set the weapon down on the table and the sound of metal hitting wood turned Cerya's attention away from Commander Martel.

Pointing to the weapon Justinios asked her, "Do you know what this is?"

"A grenade of some sort?" she responded, puzzled.

Justinios opened his palm once more and the weapon snapped into his hand as if magnetically drawn to it. The blade sprung to life as soon as it arrived. It's hum hung in the room for a moment before Justinios spoke again. "This, dear Ceyra, is a lightsaber and you must trust that you are now under the protection of not just an arrogant alien fool but an arrogant alien fool who bends the Force to his will."

Stunned, Ceyra did not respond as Justinios deactivated his weapon. It was Commander Martel that broke the silence.

"Sir, the Red Shift is five minutes out but Kilo reports that outgoing broadcasts from SRI agents indicate that the Consul has gone missing after agreeing to meet with Drayen here on Chyron. Of more concern to us at the moment is that that the *Paragon* is being shadowed by Caelus Security ships."

"Is the *Paragon* under fire?" Jiq asked. It may not have been his business officially but the question popped out before he could stop it.

Martel, to his credit, didn't hesitate to respond. Jiq appreciated this, a good warrior knew when to follow protocol and when to leave it behind for the good of the mission. "Negative but it seems folly to make a break for their location, even if they have no idea Ceyra is with us they will assume we carry something of value if we attempt to run the blockade."

The entire group looked at Justinios, waiting for the Aleena to come through on the promise he had made just a few moments ago. The Aleena began scratching the off-white patch of skin on his chin where a human may have had a beard as he processed this new information. More silent moments passed before he abruptly exclaimed, "I've got it!" Which he immediately followed up with, "But none of you are going to like it."

Nobody responded, all of those present waiting for Justinios to continue his line of thinking. He didn't and Jiq decided to prod him, "And, what it is it?"

"I shall answer your question with a question," the Aleena stated, looking awfully proud of himself. "Ceyra, what's your brother's address again?"

To Be Continued