

Porl Ol'Val

37 ABY

Two weeks after the attack

"...and sign there and there. Thank you. Pleasure doing business with you," Yumni Ha stated in her courteous customer service monotone.

The gnarled Bothan cracked a lopsided grin and waved a limping hauler droid to start unloading the crates. As its mechanical arms began hoisting several poor-quality shipping crates into the Bothan's cramped warehouse, its organic master remained to discuss with his Kaminoan supplier.

"Business' been pickin' up again, Ha. I smell another war a brewin'," the Bothan tapped his nose.

"I would find it disconcerting to smell the future, but recent events *have* pointed towards such an inevitability," she agreed in her breathless monotone. "Which is a shame, disruptions like that are bad for business."

"Maybe yours, but I've seen a solid pick-up in hand blaster sales. Even slugthrowers seem ta be takin' off. Managed to get rid of that ol' Hysian bore cleaner yesterday for my askin' price. That was a sale an' a half!" the man chuckled.

Yumni furrower her nonexistent brow.

"Hysian? You mean the high-end conditioner for slugthrower liners? Who on Ol'Val would have use of it? That bottle must have cost at least three--"

"Three-fifty."

"--hundred and fifty credits. Don't see many smugglers coming through who'd be willing to pay that price for glorified barrel wash."

"Hey now! Hysian bore cleaner's top o' the line stuff! It be worth at least three quarters what he paid for it."

"Interesting, so you would be inclined to order more?" Yumni asked, already pulling out her order forms.

"Oh no! Stars no! That bottle musta sat on me counter fer years. Good thing the boy wasn't readin' the use-by-date..." the Bothan chuckled.

“Boy? Are you telling me that a *boy* on Ol’Val had the necessary finances to purchase a bottle of Hypsian bore cleaner?”

“Aye, and paid in creds too, didn’t even ask nothin’. Just came in, said he wanted the bottle an’ left. Bim-bam-boom, creds in the counter.”

“You do not find this *odd*?”

“I ‘spose, but I ain’t complainin’. If odd nets me a hefty profit, I say bring in all tha’ oddballs of the Galaxy, ‘cus have I got a deal for you.”

Yumni ran a slender digit along the subtle curve of her chin. “Mind if I have a look at your security tapes?”

“Huh? Why ya wanna do that?”

“Call it a *scent* of future events,” she replied.

The Bothan glanced over his shoulder at the droid that kept hauling crates of weapons and ammunition at its slow, limping pace and shrugged. “Sure, why not? I could use tha’ company.”

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The security tapes had revealed an intriguing sight. True to his word, the Bothan had sold the weapons lube to a boy. A particular yellow-hued Twi’lek boy, in fact, which made the sale all the more interesting. The grainy security feed, filmed through a dusty lense that hadn’t been cleaned in ages, wasn’t the best to go by, but with some educated guesswork, Yumni was able to piece together some further clues.

The Twi’lek had carried with him a disposable plastek cup with a fairly inconspicuous logo. A swift check-up had found no match for any licensed business on Ol’Val that carried such an emblem, which left two options. Either he was fresh off a shuttle, or it was from one of the illegitimate food vendors.

An hour of asking around her (un)usual contacts, she’d uncovered a small fried mynock joint somewhere deep in the old mining outposts that allegedly had a similar logo. Of course, verifying that it truly was so would require a physical presence.

Upon returning to her ship, Yumni Ha poured herself a tall glass of purified water and contemplated. The information she had now was worth *something*. It was not worthless, but it was certainly not hard intel upon which House Qel-Droma could act. On the one hand, she had no business in dealing with such things, but on the other, profit.

An impressive amount of mental arithmetic and cost-benefit analysis later, she finished the dregs of her glass and came to a conclusion. It was a safe option, balancing reward and risk, time and resources. She reached out to her communicator and selected a contact marked by three simple letters 'F.P.I.'.

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A swirl of smoke rose idly from the half-burn fag upon the ashtray, its gentle coil mingling with the perpetual darkness within the rundown office. Stale light filtered in through a frosted window pane, a chipped 'P.I.' embellished upon it.

A dark figure sat within that room, lost entirely in shadow save for a pair of piercing yellow eyes that screamed out in muted silence of a haunted existence yet to be lived. Black fur, barely kempt in civilized order, covers her body from head to stubby toes, only marred by streaks of darker grey where the signs of a life so far lived have imposed themselves upon her.

The console on her desk lights up with a pair of letters, 'Y.H.M.'.

The dark shape reaches out a stunted arm and presses a key to receive.

A weary, whiskey-bleached voice fills the smoke choked room.

"Yub-nub?"

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Sluuurp!

The sound of suction whistled past crushed ice at the bottom of his plastek cup as Pib'leni rustled the coolant chips around in search of the last sips of his soft drink. The skinny Twi'lek was leaning against the load bearing wall of a worn down mining cantina that some entrepreneurial soul had converted into a mynock joint. The grub was gross, but the prices were at least high, especially when compared to the fare one might have gotten in what could be called the 'center' of Ol'Val.

But these were the small prices they paid when working in the outskirts. No-one who could afford to exist in even the twilight of legality that was Ol'Val proper would sink this deep into the kark. The only folk around here, in addition to himself, were cut-throats and murderers. And he was excluded from that group merely by a lack of success.

His foot keeps tapping restlessly against the stone floor, the low gravity of the asteroid making pebbles semi-float up from the tremors. He tosses the now drained cup into a trash bin, the pale plastek cylinder joining five of its number. The extra sugar isn't helping him any.

The waiting is killing him. It always did. It always had. He hated the sense of impending events when he could do *nothing* beyond while away the moments of stillness, certain that calamity was to ensue, but unable to know *when* or *how*.

Even as a mining slave, the wait he had to endure for his eventual beating was worse than the sharp stings upon his back. *Almost* worse, anyway. He remembered one time when...

Rubble shifted in the distance, pebbles dancing down a larger boulder like beads.

Pib shifted his bored gaze into the general direction of the sound, alike his hand to the grip of his vibroknife. He did not move further, thought momentarily on hold as he waited for what was to come.

Slow, ponderous treads sounded. Coarse gravel grinding beneath heavy boot steps. It was just another guard.

Pib'leni returns to his thoughts, reminiscing about the particularly sadistic Sullustan who relished in beating up everyone bigger than her. The day she realized he'd had a growth spurt and crossed that 'magic border', she'd taken the whole day to engrain in him just what his place in the world was.

Pib scoffed. At the time, he'd been too scared to even try and resist it. But now, now he knew better. Now he truly **knew** his place and he would hunt down that slaver, just like he'd hunted down that Jedi *schutta* who'd tried to trick them all into Arconan slavery. He'd track her down and slit her throat, after he whipped her with her own whip...

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Farra'Hyte calmed her breath after almost blowing her cover, hunkering behind a large boulder not some twenty five meters from the target. The diminutive Ewok was dressed in her trademark trench coat and brandished a pair of magnoculars with in-built recording functions. Once she judged the guards to have lapsed back into inattention, she peeked around her hiding spot and zoomed in on the Twi'lek boy.

click click click

It was obvious that this was the hiding spot for more than just him. She could see gang signs, weapons, ugly mugs and bad attitude all around.

click click click

Yumni would have to pay her extra.

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Lucine Vasano steadied herself against a bloody cough, managing to stifle it with sheer force of will and a hint of aid from the Force. A number of picts were spread across her desk, showing various individuals, pieces of heavy weapons and symbols she'd grown to hate with a fiery passion over the past days.

Yumni had been expensive, but that woman seemed to always somehow be worth every last credit. If only other hookers were as reliable...