

Selen
37 ABY

"Ya sure ya can do this, luv? Dinnae do us any good ta lose yer contact if this all goes sideways."

"I've got it, Kord. This kind of op of the whole point, to have someone in the right place at the right time to just... Nudge things along. It'll be okay."

"If yer sure. And please be sure, cause I'd sure like ta not fall apart again just when I got things getting put back together. Or get murdered by Uji."

"Please, he knows the risks we take. He'll only murder you if you keep telling Sammy to call him Uncle." She glared at him. "And I'll be right behind."

"Oi, that's quality humor, it is."

"Frak off. I'm heading out. Got anything else for me?"

The Ryn Consul's light attitude retreated back to seriousness, though his smirk stayed in place, grim and sharp. "Yeah. Give 'em bloody hell and rob 'em blind."

Satsi Tameike grinned.

Nancora
35 ABY

The desert wind is coarse and dry. The sun beats down unforgiving. It is the sort of environment that has kept his men in enviro-suits or armor or under shelters all night and into day, hampering their movement to their next position.

Kerwin remembers it because he had first noticed her thinking she should have been dead, in a storm like that.

They come upon the party of bodies at nine in the morning, by Nancora's cycle. Only one is bedecked in the finery the Force-Users are so fond of, dark silk ruined by sand and the corpse drying out in it. The rest are thin and barely clothed creatures, likely of the servant class. Likely the slaves or servants of the Force-User, made by mind violation or terror or threat of violence to follow their unlawful master out into a wasteland that would kill them. More lives ruined by the Brotherhood.

Kerwin was about to order his men to stop for rest and shelter — he'd have had graves dug but that the wind would well blow away their efforts and unearth the bodies again — when he

noticed her. It was her hair, really, that caught his eye, a bright splash of vivid blue among the endless landscape of parched orange-brown. The short-shorn locks fluttered in the gale.

And, because he was already staring, he saw her chest rise and fall.

"Medic!" shouted the horned general. "This one is alive!"

He dismounts his speeder and goes to her himself, lifting her body in his flesh arm to prevent any further harm with his massive cybernetic one. She is limp but not frail, all muscle and scars upon scars. Her skin is a deep tangerine and her brows, lashes, and hair all sapphire.

Her face is almost covered by the black ink of a marking; the Plagues symbol. He knows his enemy's colors, all of them. She wears no other patches of rank or insignia. No weapons.

He shakes her, firmly, and she issues a groan. The squad medic brings a deployable tent and begins inflating it around them. The wind quiets enough that he can hear her gasping.

Her eyes flutter, slits of black and white.

"What is your name?" he demands.

"Sa...Sa...t..."

"Sat...?"

"San...then. Santhen."

She falls unconscious again. He handles her carefully until the medic begins his work, and then retreats as he would from any enemy prisoner of war.

He intends to investigate further. But for the moment, they have a target to reach and Brotherhood forces to intercept.

-X-

In the remaining weeks on Nancora, he keeps Santhen imprisoned with the rest of the stray agents or intelligence targets they capture. She is questioned repeatedly, but her story remains the same and her usefulness even less so, and so the interrogation unit moves on quickly to other, more important individuals.

When the evacuation orders come through, yet Kerwin decrees any remaining prisoners below a certain level of usefulness be left behind. They don't having any reason to spend resources on

them, and Nancora is sure to kill them as easily as a blaster bolt. If they live to return to their masters, then they will have little to tell and even smaller lives.

It is as the release is ongoing that Kerwin notices Santhen staring at him, as would an animal with a bone. Her gaze burns, and he realizes her eye color is bright green. They never identified a species for her file, as she had not known, but Near-Human seemed good enough to match her Human blood results and alien coloring.

Perhaps it is the intensity of the stare that has him walk over amidst the orderly hubbub of prisoner discharge, but either way the hulking Ithronian approaches. She craned her neck back to stare at him.

"What is it?" he asks her, and she flinches — she always flinched, from loud noises or a raised hand or voice, according to reports — but spoke.

"Me want...safe! A-asylum. Yes. Safe, me want safe from Brethrenhood."

"You are not being sent back to the Brotherhood. You and the others will be released into the Badlands. After that, your devices are your own."

"Santhen not the understanding."

Kerwin considers her. "You will be released into—"

"No, no, Master. What your want for me doing then?"

The general pauses. He feels anger at the Force-Users, and his scars along the seams of his arm and eye flare in pain.

"Santhen, I am not your Master. I am no one's."

"Master slave," she nods jerkily at the soldiers around them.

"No, Santhen. These are free men and women. I am a military commander."

At the correction, and snap in his tone, she flinches again, looking horrified. She turns to the wall behind her and begins slamming her head against it.

"Stupid, stupid Santhen! Stupid! Am sorry!"

"Stop that!" cries the man, bodily lifting her away. He sets her down again and grips her wrists as she tried to hit herself. "You don't punish yourself here. Especially for nothing. We are not the Brotherhood. We are the Collective. My name is Kerwin Drake, understood?"

"Y-yes," whimpers the slave. *Ex-slave*.

"Santhen," he says sternly, the voice he used with his twin children. "Tell me your story again. Just about you, not about the Brotherhood. It's okay."

She flinches and nods rapidly, so fast it has to hurt.

"Parents of grandparents, owned shop. News. Then made slave by masters. Mother, father, aunt, uncle, cousin, sister, brother, all slave. Santhen slave as well." The woman slumps. "Santhen had twin. Like you small babies. We slave together. Then dead. All dead. Always dead. Work work *work*, then dead." Her voice is bitter, boiling, like she was spitting acid. "Brother looked out for Santhen. Him always cut hair, so her would be like boy. Less like be taken for dancing or sex or breeding. Took boys too, but less. Santhen was a good boy too."

"I'm sorry for your suffering, Santhen. We have suffered too. So many suffer under the Brotherhood. Tell me: what do you want? You can do anything from this point on."

Her fists ball, and she looks up at Kerwin with impressive hatred. "Please. Me want kill they back."

Kerwin thinks, *Rath had intended to recruit from the ranks of the populations the Brotherhood had enslaved.*

"Santhen," he says slowly. "Why don't you join my squad for a test run? If you train hard, you may stay, join us in liberating the universe of the Force-Users. Of the Masters. It will be difficult and I will expect all you can give, but it will be your choice. What do you say?"

She doesn't even hesitate, perhaps for the first time since he'd found her.

"Yes."

Fort Blindshot **37 ABY**

"Alright, Spectre Cell. You have your orders. Ready to go?" asked the robotic voice of Rrogon Skar.

"Nah 'et!" squealed a little Human girl. She ran about on her tiny, toddling legs, markers in hand. Each member of the team simply HAD to be given a little drawing of a 'ghost' on their person; if they wouldn't be subjected to one on their cheek, then it was on a bit of a more. All except Grot had conceded to the treatment so far, and Samantha was busy chasing him around the room while he gave her hunting tips.

Qyriea chuckled at the sight, and Skar might have been smiling, since his mask hid it.

"Just leave him be, kiddo. They gotta go," the Zeltron Quaestor advised, and Samantha stuck her tongue out.

"Inky! No! I gets 'im," she cried, mimicking her mother's nickname for the woman. Satsi cackled at *that*. The toddler followed that pronouncement by jumping up onto Grot's tail and scribbling on it with her markers.

"Good job, butterfly. Now we'll all do better on our job, huh?"

"Ye!"

The team — those that were capable of emotions other than rage, pain, or brooding — chuckled and rumbled at their unofficial little mascot.

"Move out," growled the Trandoshan leader. His eyes slitted in respect though.

Their mission was simple: get in, get the supplies and treasure, get a few meatbags while they were at it, and then leave without blowing up the enemy hive. Grot found it a bit ridiculous, and Qyriea and Skar had...low...expectations for the unit to avoid destroying anything they set foot on, but that was what their sister team was for. Voidbreaker would also be involved, having been working to gather intelligence on the contents of the shipment. Together, their ship and the Marauder class *Nighthawk* would surely be able to haul all the valuables away. Or at least most of them.

Grot nodded at his squad, then at his superiors, and as Satsi kissed Sammy goodbye, they all headed out.

Hidden Collective Base

36 ABY

Her training progresses. He gets reports from his men. He doesn't keep a special eye on her, as the legions are large and his responsibilities many, their mission important, but he does notice when it comes up. At one point, he spots her blue hair again on one of his inspections, already there to deliver orders but pleased to see her specifically. Otherwise it would have been a sergeant delivering the assignment.

She looks like an actual person, or halfway to one, when he sees her. She's got more weight and less fear in her eyes, walks straighter. Supposedly her visits to medical have stopped since she ceased punishing herself in absence of a master to lash her.

"Santhen," he calls her aside, and she practically *runs* to him.

"Kerwin Drake sir!" she yells. "Me is happy see you! The instructors, them no tell us you be coming!"

"They're not supposed to." He pats her shoulder and she doesn't flinch. "You look healthy. Better. I'm glad."

"Me feel better. Me free. Is all thanks to yourself, Kerwin Drake."

"You fight your own battles, Santhen. We all do. Those who are oppressed, who have no choice, can have no culpability. You decided to fight against that oppression as soon as you became culpable, when you could have easily chosen an easier life. I respect that in my men and women."

Santhen beamed at him.

"Speaking of," he continues. "You'll be briefed later, but I'm going to send you to the command of Tissflorin to help as her aid and guard. Capital Enterprises has had to pick up many more contracts to make up for the disruption that Daggo's passing caused for the Technocratic branch, and our troops are spread thinner among the transports. The marching orders are on your pad now. Understood, Cadet?"

"Yes sir, Kerwin Drake."

His formal demeanor gentled, and he smiled slightly.

"Make us proud, Santhen, and remember what we fight for."

"Me always does."

Collective Vessel

37 ABY

The command room was quiet and dark, as Tissflorin ever demanded it. It left a lovely opening for the Human who bent over a particular console, gripping a computer spike kit to help her just in case as she navigated the menu of commands. Her main task was already done, and she was to rendezvous with the Arconans onboard in nice a few minutes; she was just here for herself at this point.

She made a sound of vicious joy when she pulled up the staff manifest, and then one of disappointment when the name Ghafa Ordram didn't appear on it.

"Frak," muttered the woman. She'd really wanted that bitch tentacle-head to be onboard, so that she could chat with her personally for what she'd had done to Ruka and Cora at Meridian Station. Like feed her her own slimey suckers one by one. Or feed her half of them and shove the other half between her legs until she bled out from the tearing. Yeah, that sounded a lot better.

But, alas. The frakkers that had had part in torturing Uji and Turel back on Canto Bight would have to do. She didn't frakking forget.

"Alright," she whispered to herself, then removed her datapad and hurried from the room. Her ears were assaulted as soon as she left the soundproofed little quarters by metallic, screeching notes and a crash of instruments in the midst of being strangled pounding out of speakers. Normally, those same speakers were issuing a constant stream of noise-dampening pitch, to counteract all the natural noise of the ship. But, she'd fixed that.

Stepping briefly over the body lying on the lavish carpet, she went to the door and typed in the code to open it, coming face to face with a tall Sephi with amber lion's eyes. She was covered in blood.

Both women smiled. They bumped fists.

"Doing good, Lara?" Satsi asked.

"Doing great! I got to dice up plenty, and the team has the cargo. How's our big bad hostage?"

She had to shout over the music.

"She's down for the count. Been blacked out ever since I set Jawa Screamo blaring in here."

With little fuss, Satsi moved to bind the Capital Enterprises' captain's hands and feet and slung her over her shoulder. Alara took the woman easily as they passed.

"Good?" Satsi checked, and Alara nodded.

"Good." The two grinned faintly at each other before Satsi sighed.

"Now, c'mon. Let's get this over with."

Alara's ears flicked downwards in sympathy, but she still nodded and drew back her fist with her free arm.

Satsi's last thought was that the Sephi was probably the only one of them present who could knock her out point-blank, stone-cold, but that it still sucked to be getting knocked out at all. Then there was just the starbust of *pain-numb-black* and then— nothing.

-X-

When Santhen woke up on her Mistress's floor, it was with a pounding head and a swarm of other Collective agents around her. A medic was checking her eyes. She suffered through it, already babbling about Kerwin Drake and Tissflorin and failing against the Force-Users, babbling about needing to die while the medic shushed her.

She'd be sent to medical, and then transferred, probably. And then she'd disappear. That was *Santhen's* part to play.

Later, Satsi Tameike would find her way back to Dajorra, at least until Santhen was needed again. But for now, she was going to close her eyes and let the morphine come.

Her head really karking hurt.