

***Sugar's Playhouse***  
**37 ABY**

The room was low lit, nearly black save the candles on the cloth-covered tables. For the spotlight directed at the stage. A woman strode deliberately across it, movements sensual, undulating, a tease in each step. She shook her hips and peeled off a glove with her teeth as the band played below her, then tossed it into the appreciative crowd and belted out a rambunctious note.

"Oh don't hustle me, *whoop whoop*, baaaby, oh no," sang the dancer. "Don't hustle me, ooooo!"

Her audience cheered for every article of her costume removed, though when she finished her song she was still dressed in a corset and bustle. She bowed to each side of the stage, deeply and shaking her rear as she did, and then exited with a wave and laughter, blowing kisses.

Uji Tameike sipped his water and clapped politely as the host returned to announce the next act while servers came to check on the customers discreetly. Appetizers and dinner had already been served as the show went on, and many plucked at their plates while watching. Uji had already long finished his meal though.

"Can I take this for you, sir?" asked his waitress, a Selenian woman named Katin. He knew her by now, and offered a kind nod.

"Thank you, Katin," he murmured, and she smiled and withdrew without bothering him about a drink order — she knew he didn't partake by now.

The man wasn't surprised when another body drew close to him, arms slipping over his chest and shoulders as she draped herself over him. He turned his head to kiss her throat, and his twin made a pleased, happy sound in return, nuzzling into his hair and nosing down his ear, his neck, nipping at his collar.

"Ready to go?" he asked her, and Satsi Tameike smiled at him.

"Just about. Let me get my bag and talk to Zak."

"All's well with the streets?"

"For the moment."

She pulled back, and he watched his wife go, lips thinning. He could sense her troubled thoughts as easily as she could his. Though they could have privacy in their own heads if they wished it, and still hid things from one another — and that was another undercurrent of trouble, of paranoia and anger and betrayal and still savage love — they generally spent the time they did have in close contact or alone with their minds open.

Satsi went backstage to get her things, speaking to one of her gang lieutenants while she did. Zak reported that Capac Ring was quiet that night, but only on account of violence the previous. Estle had settled into its rebuilding for the time, but not without pains or discontent. At least it was one stressor less immediate.

Uji only had to wait a few minutes for Satsi to come back. When she did, he stood, she gazed at him gratefully.

He'd walk her home in the dead of night.

She wrapped an arm around the one he offered. His other hand gripped his cane, and together they exited her club and set a slow pace down the street. Tonight they were headed toward the Citadel, as Uji had duties to attend in the morning; rarer and rarer was it that they got to go back to their manor for a night. They lived in both places at the moment, mainly at Satsi's insistence. Sammy seemed delighted to have a "home" *and* a "castle".

The further they got, the more and more of his weight leaned on her, which she supported easily without comment. She just gripped his hand tighter. He squeezed it back when she sucked in a too fast breath at the shift of a particular shadow.

Her mind was still askew, even if she had her family back, even if she was some definition of safe, and the nightmares were too much to bear. She was prideful and stubborn and hell-bent on fixing her own problems, and she was broken and uncertain and weak. She fought for control in her sleep, her nightmares putting her at risk of possession by her own memories and traumas. They have not told *anyone* how many times Uji has woken up to Satsi rolling on top of him and shoving a gun to his mouth, weeping to be left alone; they never *will* tell anyone the way she has to be dragged into the shower still clothed to be shaken from the grips of a raping and beating and branding from almost two years ago; they admit only to each other how Uji can't lift her any longer without the Force's aid, or how it kills him by the second to tap into it for anything at all, or how Satsi started taking on so many tasks with the Collective offensive and against the Dark Council and with the summit and the gang and her team, because if she wasn't everywhere then someone would notice Uji couldn't be *somewhere*.

They both worry, in their shared mindscape, when Samantha is going to notice and realize. She's already so smart. She asks why her mother cries so much. She promises to take care of her mother when her father asks her to before he leaves. She brings her father his cane when she's up before them in the morning. Sometimes, she asks why they have stripes — scars — on them. Sometimes she asks why she's not allowed down into Estle. Why her parents leave so often.

Once, she'd turned to them out of the blue, having been staring down at the city from the Citadel, and said, in her speech-impaired gibberish, "there's so much wrong going on outside."

Too smart.

And it was all too much, for them. They'd gone from being targeted for defiance to being targeted just for existing. Rath Oligard and his cohorts would slit their toddler's throat and feed her to dogs just for being born.

Uji and Satsi would run themselves into the ground and die before they let that happen.

So he walked her home, and she wasn't alone with all that was on her mind, that constant, bone deep fear. He walked her home, and she held him up and kept him moving, kept them safe.

"*Kyodai?*" Satsi asked, aloud, as they came up to the Citadel's bridge, having passed by the statue of Atyiru and through the three rings of the city.

"Yes, *shimai?*"

"I'm going back to Blindshot tomorrow, got another Spectre job. You'll be in your meeting?"

"It's the first of the month, I have reports to release."

"Mmm."

"What is it?"

"Nothing," replied Satsi, and in their minds said, *everything*. "I'll miss you and Sammy."

"You will see us soon."

"Doesn't mean I won't miss you," she murmured, and in their minds said, *some Technofrak could kill me tomorrow and I'll never hold you again and I can't, I can't*.

"I know," Uji intoned, and she hit him for being blase, like always, and he winced, like always.

They went up to their chambers, and checked on their daughter, who was mercifully asleep at the late hour. Then they undressed and slipped into bed and curled tight together, and Satsi pressed kisses in the shape of watery smiles against his skin.

She held on while she still could.