

Port Ol'val
Dajorra system
37 ABY

Yumni Ha had a plan. Yumni Ha *always* had a plan. She had an eye for business and an ear for demand, especially the demands of her best customers. House Qel-Droma needed a new ship and even before they'd voiced such murmurs, she'd put things in motion to deliver them precisely that and now, it was time to acquire.

Fleeting paces carried the spindly woman to a seedy dive bar, one frequented by people of ill repute and thus precisely the sort she was now after. Loose lips crippled ships and a bunch of unscrupulous demi-pirates had the loosest lips of them all. And one particular scrupule deficient crook even more than his peers.

"Jayme Hortell, I am pleased to see you've cheated the laws of statistics once again. Or have you grown soft in your old age and hired a *qualified* mechanic to tend to your ship?" Yumni greeted the scarred Duros who turns around from the counter with a scowl that soon lit up upon seeing 'an old friend'.

"Yumni Ha, I heard you'd taken up an allegiance. Very unlike you, I must say. Should I be worried? Next thing I know, you're trying to rope me into a waged job," the Duros replied with a toothy grin.

"I would hardly call it an allegiance. More of a *preferred customer*."

"I don't see the difference."

"And that is why I make more profit in a quarter than you've made over a decade operating that junk pile of yours."

The Duros scowled. Yumni's face remained as inscrutable as ever. He chuckled.

"That may be true, but I still maintain I wouldn't have it any other way," he mused and took a swig from his mug of something potent. The reek wafted effortlessly to the Kaminoan's nostrils and burned.

"So, what brings you here, Ha? I doubt things have changed so much as to make you suddenly a social butterfly."

"Business, as usual. Be it as it may, you've got associates and acquaintances in places I do not, so I find myself requiring your particular contacts."

“Oh? And for what reason might that be? Doesn't your outfit supply anything to anyone, as long as the price is right?”

“It does, but I also have to have *my* sources of supply, do I not?” Yumni replied dryly to the smirking Duros. Not that her tone of voice had shifted much from its usual androgynous drone.

“Fair enough, now what do you need? I'm sure I can hook you up, for a price.”

“Mining equipment.”

The Duros' brow wrinkled in surprise. “Mining equipment? Whatever for? Never saw you as anything but a spacer...”

“Not for me, obviously, but my *clients*. They've uncovered a valuable dig site on... actually, that is not important for you to know. All I require is that you provide me with the drills, hoses, pumps and the works. And I need them to be precise.”

“Precise? How precise?”

“To skin a mynock.”

Jayme looked shocked. He didn't know much about mining, but he knew that such equipment would be rare to come by. Real specialist tech, for very special applications.

“What on Alderaan are you digging there?” he inquired as he leaned forward and lowered his voice.

Yumni leaned in closer, her celestial eyes meeting his graphite rubies. “None of your business, Jayme. Just get me the equipment.”

She leaned back and the man scoffed, grumbling something to himself as he took another swig.

“It'll cost ya.”

“I wasn't expecting handouts.”

“A fair bit.”

“I am well aware.”

“Good, I'll be in touch when I get the kit. How will I contact you?”

“I'm staying on Ol'val to arrange other deliveries. You can find me here, when you're done,” the Kaminoan replied.

And with that, Yumni turned around and headed back towards the port, knowing full well that the breadcrumbs she'd left would be *far* too enticing for Jayme to ignore. He was almost too predictable at times, but how could she blame him? A man his age, with a ship its age, he would need every credit he could scrape. And if the Dawn Conclave's funders were indeed those that Qel-Droma suspected they were, they'd be more than willing to pay for his information.

She almost considered it a favor to him. Almost.

Unmarked Safehouse

Port Ol'val

37 ABY

"So, our esteemed foes are preparing for some digging?" the synthetically smarmy voice of a heavily augmented Human broke the silence of the cramped safehouse. Mitchyl Karren rubbed his stubbly chin with an idle durasteel digit as he considered the information one of his subordinates had purchased from a Duros privateer.

"This is inconsequential to our plans, K. We must not lose sight of our objective," demanded the obscured Skakoan over the hololith. The woman was only known as Q.

"And our objective is...?" Mitchyl inquired with a lazy drole.

"To weaken House Qel-Droma of Clan Arcona and deliver it a mortal blow from which it will not recover."

"Textbook," Mitchyl agreed absent-mindedly.

Q remained inscrutable as always.

"But that is your problem, Q. You never look at the big picture. Always going after *the objective*."

"The objective is of paramount importance. Anything superfluous is, by definition, unnecessary and a dangerous distraction. Our hold on Ol'val is not firm enough to allow for such -"

"I would not call this superfluous, my friend," Mitchyl cut her off. "It could even be said this is *paramount*."

"Explain."

"House Qel-Droma is engaged with our operatives. We've dealt them a wound and they are bleeding."

“And they have also struck back. We’ve lost several of our best agents and we are pushed to our limits in getting new opportunities to hurt them at a cost that is sustainable. We do not have the resources to-”

“Neither does Qel-Droma,” Mitchyl cut her off, again. Q’s ire was starting to rise, he could feel it, even over hololith. “They’ve poured every resource they have into this fight and their forces are as stretched as ours. We’re at each other’s throats, my dear. But we’re both too weak to close our jaws.”

There was a pause.

“Your point, K?” The annoyance was heavy in Q’s voice.

“What could be so important that they’d waste their resources in this crucial moment on some wild errand, when every last hand is trying to contain us?”

“...”

“You’re starting to see it, aren’t you? This venture represents a far more important objective for them than we do. Failure there would be, in their eyes, a greater existential threat than the damage we could inflict while they mine.”

“What is it you are suggesting?” It seemed he’d caught her interest.

“I think I know what they’re mining and if I’m correct, I know why they’re more concerned with that asteroid than us. There’s only one substance that requires such delicate equipment, and which is precious enough for someone to risk as much as they’re willing to risk on this...”

Q seemed to have realized what he was talking about as she nodded slowly.

“Kyber...”

Asteroid Cluster

Cerebus system

37 ABY

“What makes you certain this scheme of yours is even going to work?” Tali Sroka inquired as she stood behind the calm Kaminoan on the bridge of the *Esperanza* and watched the drifting hunks of space rock drift by.

Yumni Ha didn't take her eyes off the controls as her hands moved at a gentle, if purposeful pace to guide the venerable trade mule of a freighter past the void hazards and towards their intended target. The Twi'lek had almost insisted on being part of this mission the moment she'd been told what it would entail. It was clear, the woman was out for revenge and though Yumni herself had been conceived in a more sophisticated fashion, she could still comprehend that one might want revenge on those who'd murdered their child. After all, seeing one's creation destroyed before completion must have been *vexing*.

"Nothing is ever certain, lady Sroka, but it gives me confidence to know that we've been tracked since entering the edge of the system."

"What?! You mean they're on our tail? Andt you saidt nothing!"

"Please, there is no need for shouting. I am perfectly able to hear you at regular volume levels. And there is nothing out of the ordinary here. I've been tracked for the past week. A Dawn Conclave agent, no doubt, placed a beacon in my cargo hold a day after my conversation with Jayme Hortell. That was when I knew this would be a success."

Tali wasn't sure whether to admire or strangle the long-necked woman. The latter seemed like a far more satisfying choice at the moment. Deciding to save her hatred for the people who'd *actually* hurt her, she let out a calming breath before speaking up again.

"So, what happens now?"

"We await the arrival of their assault forces."

"What makes you so sure there will be any?"

"Because they failed to bypass our security via other means."

Tali was sure she saw the faintest hints of a smug smile on the inscrutable alien's reflection as she continued to pilot her ship without visible distraction. Sometimes, she found her aggravating. At others, merely frustrating. She'd yet to decide on which it would be today.

"I will be vaiting," she stated bluntly and left the bridge, her battle plate clicking with every pace. "Good luck," Yumni replied more out of habit than genuine concern. It was one of those things she'd picked up over her years, idle gestures that seemed to put other minds at ease. She herself did not believe in luck, only preparations.

Bridge of the *Starspite*
Vakbeor-class Frigate
37 ABY

Mitchyl's durasteel hand gripped the railing beside the captain's pulpit, the wide grin on his features marred only by the unyielding metal that made up the majority of his left cheek. It was a masterwork of surgery that had saved him after the slug almost ended him, but the Collective's technicians had not considered it necessary to retain the more *human* elements of his features. And it had hardly been his place to disagree.

The streaks of stars and the nebulous vortex of light of hyperspace before him was filling him with anticipation for the coming battle. He'd have loved nothing more than to already be there, on that forlorn asteroid mining base, to see the looks on the Qel-Dromans' faces when they arrived in near space around them and opened up with their turbo-lasers.

On second thought, perhaps less so to witness the results of said bombardment.

He was snapped from his gloating by Q's hololithic projection flickering into existence on a plinth beside him, her synthetic voice even more distorted whilst they were still in transit.

"I hope your gamble pays off, K."

"It is not a gamble, Q," Mitchyl insisted. "I don't believe in luck."

"Neither do I, K, but I am putting an awful lot of credibility on your shoulders. Requisitioning that ship and the men was not an easy task. Our resources are already being stretched thin fighting the other Clans..."

Mitchyl shrugged and turned to glance at her. "I will not fail."

"You'd better not. For all our sakes..." Q cut the link at her end.

Asteroid Cluster
Cerebus system
37 ABY

The *Esperanza* made her final approach towards a large, continent-sized hunk of rock upon which a small mining outpost had been erected in less than a week. At least, what ostensibly looked like one. Buying damaged equipment off the AEF had been a pittance compared to the value of what they might get for it, and even the mining equipment in her hold would most likely not go to waste. She'd just yet to find a buyer.

Qel-Droma was indeed a House full of spymasters and subterfuge, and perhaps that was why this plan had garnered such interest by the Aedile. Or perhaps she merely wished to prove herself to her superior, it was always difficult for her to discern people's true motivations beyond the obvious.

In any event, it mattered little now. They were committed to the ruse.

She'd barely deployed the freighter's landing struts when her sensor picked up a distortion. A moment later, she received a similar signal from the asteroid base's sensors. A hyperspace anomaly, almost capital-ship grade. They had their target.

Proceeding to play her part, Yumni landed on lit pad and opened the cargo bay doors. The skeleton crew aboard the outfit would need to be evacuated. *Now.*

Not a minute later a ship simply *appeared* above them, its almost five hundred meter bulk looming overhead like a callous predator. The Vakbeor-class was not a frontline battleship, but it was more than capable of dealing with one illicit mining base on its own. And far less likely to suffer catastrophic damage in an asteroid field...

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Aboard the *Starspite* Mitchyl felt his organic hand almost trembling as the first volleys of laser fire pattered harmlessly against the frigate's deflector screens. The volume of fire was so pitiful they could have sustained it for the entire day without damage.

"Open a hail to that miserable rock. I'll give them a choice to surrender before we slaughter them," he spoke to a faceless aide who promptly did his bidding and opened up the channel.

Adjusting his posture, Mitchyl smiled with contempt as the *Starspite* returned fire and blasted the surface turrets into submission with a few well-aimed volleys of her ventral turbo-lasers. That should have caught their attention..

"Attention Jedi scum and the lackeys thereof. The Dawn Conclave has uncovered your pitiful ploy and will administer the fate of her enemies. But, we are not without mercy. Those of you who wish to surrender and denounce their cruel Jedi masters, do so now, and your lives will be spared. Those who continue to resist and fight alongside those murderers, criminals and child-snatchers, prepare to meet your oblivion."

He paused to allow for any response that might be forthcoming while looking down at the blasted remains of their defence battery. It had been brushed aside with ease. Perhaps *too* much ease.

He did not have time to dwell, however, as a crackling reply came in from the asteroid below.

“-ttention pompous Conclave scumbag! If you’ve got the balls to face us, do so now, or go suck off a Ban-!” Mitchyl’s aide cut the transmission before the man on the other side could deliver his full insult.

He scowled. A lesser man might have been goaded into brash action, but *he* was not a lesser man. There was a chance this might be a set-up. They clearly *wanted* him to deploy ground troops. But for what end? He would have to proceed with caution.

“Send out a pair of shuttles and deploy fighter escorts. But keep our ground forces on standby. I want to see what they have up their sleeves...”

Within moments, TIE fighters had been deployed alongside a pair of Sentinels that descended towards the asteroid, Mitchyl almost glued to the tactical display that oversaw their deployment. He could see no reason for their goading until...

Warning klaxons began to blare as hidden missile silos opened on the far sides of the installation, firing off a succession of concussion missiles that homed in on the approaching landing craft. The fighters tried to intercept, but to no avail and in a pair of detonations the Sentinels were turned into clouds of burning debris.

Mitchyl growled at the stinging loss, but now his foe had played their hand.

“Engage the launchers! I want them destroyed!”

Heavy turbo-laser fire began to pound the area around the launchers, battering away at the rock formations that kept them safe from harm. Bolt after bolt turned stone into vapor and glass, but the going was slow and the results unpredictable. No visible detonations to indicate a successful hit.

Mitchyl was starting to grow tired of watching the ineffectual bombardment when his aide informed him of a transmission incoming. It was from Q.

“K, whatever you’re about to do, do it quick. We’ve detected scrambling calls amongst the DDF. They’re deploying warships to your location!”

Mitchyl felt his hands ball into fists, one organic and one metallic, as he began to realize the full extent of his foe’s defences. But the reinforcements would not be here yet, not for some time. The hyperspace jump from Dajorra would take at least a few hours, so he had that long.

“Don’t worry, Q. I’m on top of it,” he stated dismissively and cut the link, turning towards the stubborn rock that refused to yield.

“Sir, I’ve got another transmission incoming,” his aide spoke up.

“What does she want now?” he muttered and turned towards the hololith.

“It’s not her, sir. It’s coming from the asteroid.”

“Oh? Put it through.”

The same garbled voice from before returned, now even more distorted than before as faint tremors of turbo-laser impacts could be heard in the background.

“-damned frakkers! You going to blow us all up?!”

“If that’s what it takes, you sniveling dogs,” Mitchyl replied with unrestrained contempt. “I will bombard you all to ruin if I-”

“Then enjoy dyin’ with us! We’re sittin’ on enough kyber to crack a small moon!”

Mitchyl gulped. Whoever it was on the other end *was* right. If the asteroid was full of kyber, as he’d clearly correctly presumed it was, then perhaps rattling it with turbo-laser fire until they hit a vein of it was *not* the most sound of tactical choices.

He gestured for his aide to cut the link and then for the gunnery crews to cease fire. The asteroid base was now a smoking ruin, but clearly the tunnels beneath the surface were holding out perfectly fine. Well, until a stray shot detonated the entire damn thing...

“Umh, sir. If I may be so bold...” A timid voice spoke up behind him and a junior officer, dressed in the garb of the Technocrats, stood at attention with a faint sliver of fear on his cybernetically enhanced features. “It is likely those launchers cannot target our ships if we deploy them at the far side of the asteroid. Approaching across the open might be risky, and take some time, but a direct assault would appear to carry the risk of, *unsustainable* casualties.”

Mitchyl wanted to debate that point. He so very much wanted to, but he was not a military man. He was not a tactician, at least not for outright war. He was a strategist and these matters of detail were starting to vex him. He nodded.

“Very well then, move us over to the far side and deploy ground troops.”

The man saluted and went to do his bidding.

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“What is taking them so long?” Tali Sroka pined, her mind constantly tugging at the pair of saber hilts at her belt.

“Give them time, they’ll figure it out eventually,” Malfrost Xeon mused.

“[I FIND THE TACTICAL COGITATION OF THESE MEATBAGS TO BE INFURIATINGLY LACKING.]” Malfrost’s IG-100 stated coldly, to which the Sorcerer could only smirk.

“I am sure if they were droids, they’d have fallen into our trap already,” he barbed back.

The Magna-guard remained silent for a moment before replying. “[BEGRUDGINGLY AGREED.]”

The trio sat within the *Lekmaster’s* cockpit, observing the fighting from a distance. Other members of Voidbreaker were waiting in the passenger bay. A strike team of hand-picked individuals who wanted some payback.

She’d had to turn down a few to not overcrowd the ship. No love was lost for the enemy and the Twi’lek could feel it.

“Now, they’ve engaged their maneuvering engines,” Malfrost stated, pointing at the spikes of blue ion jets on the sides of the frigate as it began to adjust course.

Tali’s lips curled into a smile. “Alright, holdt on. Ve are going in!”

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The timing was nearly flawless. The moment the last Conclave shuttle had landed upon the asteroid to disgorge its passengers, taking the fighter escort with it, the nimble Arconan assault ship had dived into view from behind obscuring asteroids and gunned its engines towards the *Starspite’s* throat.

Caught off guard, the sporadic defensive fire had failed to stop it from reaching the hull and latching onto the durasteel plating like a stubborn tick. Within moments, plasma cutters had torn a hole into its guts and the strike team was inserted.

Mitchyl watched in horror as the klaxons dyed his bridge a foreboding red. All around him Conclave armsmen were hurrying to entrench themselves against the boarders, but something told him it wouldn’t be enough. When the pair of lightsabers pierced through the half-a-meter thick blast door behind him, he knew why.

A storm of violence ensued, the screams and cries of wounded men mingling with the bark of weapons fire and the ozone hiss of lightsaber blades. Sharp yells of angered combatants

drowned out the scent of burning flesh and all was smothered in a blanket of smoke and brilliant flashes.

As swiftly as it had begun, the fighting died down and Mitchyl found himself alone on the bridge, trapped beneath the body of his aide and a venomous pair of amber eyes staring down at him. The Twi'lek held a yellow saber down at his face, her own twisted into a savage snarl.

She was fighting hard not to end him, and he found himself grateful for her fortitude.

"The bridge is ours!" Malfrost declared.

"Goodt, purge the ship," Tali replied as she yanked the terrified officer to his feet and cuffed him, a mag lock over an organic and metallic wrist.

"[PURGING]" There was something deeply unsettling in the synthetic glee of the IG-100's voice as it interfaced into the ship's systems and vented all crew spaces. Plumes of crystallizing oxygen puffed out into all directions, forming brilliant clouds of pure white around the frigate's hull within which the struggling corpses of her erstwhile crew slowly asphyxiated.

"[ESPERANZA REQUESTING PERMISSION TO DOCK.]"

"Grantedt, let's get this ship back to base..." Tali smiled as the dull *thunk* of the light freighter docking onto the *Starspite* echoed down the vacated corridors. Their plan had gone off perfectly, but even so, the Twi'lek was not feeling satisfied.

The Conclave had yet much to pay for.

And she loathed to see Yumni's smug, featureless grin...