

The Citadel
Selen

"Ta Sever...Savvy...Severus...Sev Prince? Principal? Oh who bloody comes up wit dese names?"

"Severian *Principate*," Lucine offered blandly, examining her nails; no doubt less a sign of inattention to the material and more one of boredom in explaining it to the Consul. The scheming redhead surely knew everything there was to know about the faction by now and had made copious notes about it, likely gone ignored. Between Uji and Rhy lance, two nearly savant intellectuals, Kord had had plenty of opportunity to enjoy delegating most reading or studying to his Proconsuls.

"They are an authoritarian commercial empire in the eastern Outer-Rim. It's organized from a dozen star systems, previously a rare Imperial Warlord state which not only endured but thrived following the Empire's collapse. Mainly mining worlds, now trade colonies. Their military is expansive and service is mandatory, and it seems they have many connections to the Hutts they border," aforementioned current Shadow Scion explained, pushing up his glasses. Satsi's eyes flicked to the Chiss, narrowing. Where before she had debated killing him or letting him off at least once a day before he'd replaced her twin, these days she was grateful. Or, she tried to be. He had *bribed* Uji out of the office practically by threatening his life, but the treatments he offered had allowed her brother to escape the attack on their home uninjured. And Uji was... Happier, now, to be able to do so much again, to run after Samantha on the beach and dance Satsi across the sands and wake up free of pain.

Satsi pushed the thoughts away, before she could start to brood on their home burning down or anything else she felt about the upheaval of their lives. It'd only piss her off and make her ugly, gasping, snotty cry, and she'd shoot herself before she ever so much as blinked in front of *Lucine* or any of the Arconae.

Or Rhy lance. Or the new arrival.

Satsi's gaze slid to him, another sapphire-skinned Chiss. *Someone better get a mop to follow Vasano around with*, she thought, and had to repress a snigger at her own joke.

Aldaric was a former Taldrayan, and that was enough reason for Satsi not to trust him. Not that there was much of a *bar* there, but *still*. She wasn't buying the loner, alcoholic scholar thing he had going on. She'd be keeping the man in her sights until she could sufficiently catalogue his threat level.

Which was more or less what they were all doing at this damn meeting, but not for a new Quaestor.

"So ta Principle—"

"*Principate*," Lucine stressed, and Kordath sighed hard enough to ruffle his mustaches.

"Whatever they is, they friendly?"

"Neutral would be better," the redhead answered. "It seems the Collective already tried to recruit from their ranks, and it hasn't garnered them any love. Any attempts on our part to win their favor could turn out just as poorly, particularly if they feel caught in the middle of a war that isn't their own."

"But what would that mean for us?" asked Tali, yet another new addition. Satsi rubbed her head, feeling the headache she'd been sporting for— days. The Twi'lek's accent made her want to scream. She was *definitely* memorizing it and copying it for her own database. Maybe she'd have to pull a con that annoyed somebody to death. Or be a really memorable pain in someone's ass. Being forgettable was probably one of the least used manipulator's tricks. So much easier to present something that people *would* remember, and then to disappear as someone else entirely that no longer matched the description. "Didt they retaliate against the Collective?"

"No," reported Rhyllance this time. "But it seems as though they are on distinctly unfriendly terms now."

"Ya sayin' they nae will work wit us?"

"I am saying that we cannot approach them in any matter as to make them *side* with us," replied Lucine.

"Trading with them, then?" suggested Zujenia quietly, looking unhappy to be there and not thrilled to be talking about another potential rival entity. They had enough trouble on their hands. "Definitely nothing aggressive. They'd be right, it's not their war, and nobody else needs to die because we came sniffing around."

"I did not suggest, darling—"

"*Nobody else*," Zuji stated firmly, a rare fire in her amber eyes. She was too good and soft on civvies by half, but part of Satsi could admire that. Maybe not respect it, but acknowledge it. Zuji was too good to be in the damn room. On the planet.

"Nobody is sayin' we target 'em, luv." Kord smiled tiredly at his former fiancée before looking around at his summit. "Suggestions then, ey? Sats? Ya been quiet, lass."

"Just thinking," Satsi replied. She shifted in her seat, recrossing her legs and leaning back. "I've run into the Principate before, actually. Black Suns and Hutts doing business, and the Principate is pretty cuddly with their slug neighbors, yeah. Really, really cuddly. That's where they run all their black market shit through, and they have a lot of black market shit. Especially weapons manufacturing and sell. Drugs too, they've got a deep need for that too get through the whole mandatory service thing, and it's pretty entrenched in their politics too. Soldiers stuck in peacetime, aids and Senators and students and...well, everyone, really, all trying to get a little something to keep them awake and productive longer. The whole system is really competitive to keep up with that whole 'make a better, more absolute world's ideal. And if they use hella illegal weapons tech and stockpile enough warheads to compete with the planet-killers, then...well. What the New Republic doesn't know can't hurt them."

"And? They, uh, reasonable?"

The scarred woman shrugged, trying to remember.

"It's been, what, six years now since I got out of the Suns? Doubt much has changed since then. The Principate is 'neutral,' yeah, or they try to be. They won't touch slavery and they're damn wary of sparkies — hello, former Imp splinter cell — so they're not about to be friendly with the Brotherhood on a whole. We could get supplies from them though, yeah. They're frakking loaded. Maybe get a little tourism going, send some of ours there and see if they'll come set up an outpost here. They have all the mining stock they'll ever need, won't care about anything we offer, but they might like a port this close to the Maw that can actually get through. Tempt 'em with that."

"Sound good ta the lot? Open trade talks?" Kord asked, and got murmurs and nods of agreement. "Rite. Now, about our own damn problems..."

The meeting lasted awhile longer, and they covered a couple topics. The Dawn Conclave, the rival gang troubling Ol'Val. The relative breakdown of communication from Odan-Urr recently, and the rumors of a new Clan rising to take Tarentum's place. The Collective attacks on Selen and oh, *no*, she was going to have to leave the room again, her eyes were burning—

"Satsi?" questioned Zujenia, watching her all but sprint from her chair. *Too damn nice*, the Human thought again. *After all I've done to her.*

"Things to do," the woman excused abruptly, glad she wasn't actually obligated to be here anymore by anything except her paranoia and need to control her little world somehow. At least Kordy listened to her. She was usually *right*, thanks. "I'll poke at my Hutt contacts, see about a meeting with someone in the Principate."

And then she was out the door, teeth bared at the tears dribbling off her chin more than anything else.

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Uji was at their new apartments in the Citadel with Sammy when she got back, slamming the door behind her and sliding down it with her back to the metal.

Shimai? What is wrong? her twin's voice whispered in her head, wrapping her up quickly in calm and soft concern. His mind's eye provided images of the last hour he and their daughter had spent learning the basics of holochess. Sammy knew the names all the pieces now, apparently.

Satsi watched through Uji's eyes, her own fluttered closed, the memory of the toddler picking up the Emperor piece and declaring that it was useless and she wanted another Knight instead. Her mother wheezed a fond chuckle through her closed throat.

Her brother was there, then, kneeling down — so easily, now, Shadows — in front of her to pull her into his chest. She tucked under his chin and breathed in the smell of him, trying to replace the smell of char.

Nothing is wrong, she replied as he reviewed her own perspective of the meeting. *Nothing new. Things just got better, actually, I think.*

And how is that?

I've got something to DO now, and it's going to hit back at those Collective motherfrakkers.

This Severian faction, he surmised, following the direction of her thoughts. He tilted his head. *You do not intend to tell the others.*

They might try to stop me. They're nervous.

Would you like backup?

She smiled into his skin, a snarl, a baring of teeth.

I need to get shit in order first, but then...

He kissed the top of her head as their daughter came to find out why she'd been ignored, and they pulled apart with no need for further words. They were already plotting, Uji's tactical mind racing to fill gaps hers were ignorant of.

"Show me what you're playing, butterfly," Satsi said to Sammy, who excitedly talked and talked at her. Her eyes dried. Her gut churned with a slow, deliberate hatred. Her heart thudded in excitement.

It was time for a little payback, and the Principate was going to help her do it.

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ISD-I Deepchaser
Border between Principate and Hutt space

The decommissioned warship turned mobile spaceport cruised slowly through the stars, a nearly sedentary creature of mismatched metal and old battle scars. The Destroyer's original name, *Adjudicator*, still sat on a piece of the original hull, nearly obliterated by carbon scoring and the typical abuse of longtime spaceflight. Rust lined some edges while others were shiny chromium, recently retrofitted to patch hull gaps or cover weapons bays that were no longer housing lasercannons.

Inside, its many hangars were microcosmos all their own, rife with various activity. Each one was its own docking bay for smaller craft, unloading area, and marketplace hub all in one, miniature ports kept from the vacuum outside through the marvel of magfields and powerful shipwide shielding.

In one such bay, fancifully titled Hangar Keski, a woman descended from her own shuttle. It bore heraldry on its side that had several people giving it a wide berth, waiting for the 'port authorities' to come and interact first, just in case of any unpleasantness. No one wanted to deal with the potential enemy that had recently been circulating the Principate newsfeeds.

"No further," called a lightly armored man with a blaster in hand and two others similarly armed at his flanks, approaching the ship as the new arrival descended her boarding ramp. "Remove your helm and state your ident, vehicle serial, cargo manifest, and intent of business."

The man himself was some pale Near-Human, young behind his lifted visor. Probably just a year into the conscripted service he'd be giving his government. He couldn't have been older than twenty Coruscant years, and had not a scar on him visible.

The passenger he greeted was an entirely different story as she lifted free her helmet, seals hissing. Her skin was a deep tangerine covered in scars upon scars, mostly looking like the whipping variety of a former slave; something many in the Principate of previous generations had known well, before they were freed. Her brows, lashes, and hair were all sapphire, her face almost covered by the black ink of a clan or group marking of some sort, faded like she had tried to remove it. She was dressed in heavy armor but carried no visible weapons.

"Me name be Santhen," the Near-Human announced, lifting her chin and glaring down around her with bright green eyes. "And me am not beholden to you or to any Masters."

"If you wish to dock here, Santhen, then you must comply with us. Your ship is marked with the symbol of an organization known as the Collective, and is a model known to be used in their fleets. Are you aware of this? Did you acquire it as salvage? Be truthful in your responses and we will not need to arrest or detain you, but know that for the safety of Principate citizens, if you do associate with the Collective or fail to comply, you will be charged."

Santhen's hands fell to her hips.

"You protect individuals. That is weakness. Me fight for the collective," she stated. "And *am* Collective. Am not here for the trading or for port. Santhen brings a message for your weakness."

The guards, wisely, aimed their weapons at her words. The tradesmen around the party drew further back, and more of the militia was approaching.

"Raise your hands above your head and get down on the ground or we will fire," snapped the supposed commander, doing a decent job of hiding the quake in his young voice.

Santhen did not kneel, but she did turn her back, offering her hands. One of the guards rushed to secure her in stuncuffs, taking her helmet under arm and dragging her down from her ship. The commander spoke into his wrist comm as they began briskly escorting their prisoner away, more guards circling.

"This is Beshop, Team Aurek-97, Hangar KesK second rotation patrol. We've taken a detainee who claims to be Collective and has some sort of message—"

He didn't get to finish his delivery before a scuffle broke out in front of him. Santhen had slipped out of her cuffs — one thumb looked dislocated or broken — and gotten her arms around her leading guards woman, quickly snapping her neck.

"Jjo!" Beshop cried as his comrade fell, half charging forward and half raising his rifle when Santhen yanked on her helmet and pressed a button on a wrist device.

The **BOOOOOOOM** from behind them was the last thing he ever knew.

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Capital City, Chela
Principate space

Three pairs of eyes watched again as the holorecording of the explosion replayed. The whole incident had taken perhaps nineteen standard minutes. Just that long for the Collective to send their 'message'. Just that long for an estimated two and three quarters of a million credits worth

of goods, weapons, ships, and property to be lost. Just that long for a priceless twenty two hundred souls, most of them Principate citizens and the rest partners in trade, to be lost too.

"Play it again," one of the three demanded, and the computer recalled the program and started the footage from the beginning.

Again: the Collective agent came onboard. She was detained. She broke free and activated the bombs that had filled her ship. The blast blew a hole in the hangar wall that was weak enough then to implode when shield in the area suddenly dropped. People and cargo containers not lost in the smaller initial fire bomb were sucked into the void. Many more were crushed when the shields came back up a moment later and the momentum of entire tons of pressure practically splattered them into the walls, floors, into other ships and each other.

Their sensor logs indicated power fluctuations in the hangar area's shield generators that matched the effects of an electromagnetic weapons discharge. Evidently the Collective agent in the hangar had not been the only saboteur, but footage from around the general room had been purged. All that they had of the incident was the dockmaster's recording.

Nineteen minutes. And so much lost.

Not once in their thirty three years since the Reformation had the Principate had such a damaging attack made against them by an external source.

"Call the Senate together," growled the military arm of their Triumverate. "We're going to call a vote."

"For what? War?" asked the head of Social Administration.

"Of course. We refuse to join them in some genocidal vendetta on the other side of space, and they respond by attacking our people? I won't stand for it."

"I did not say I opposed your intent," his fellow replied in her calm manner. "I am just intent on being clear. We want to war?"

"I certainly don't want an embargo or a slap on the wrist!" this he directed partly at the head of Business.

The three grew pensive, and looked to the three dimensional rendering of blue light, the bodies of their people burning and twisting. The Collective woman's corpse hasn't been recovered, but neither had many of their own. A state of mourning had been issued.

Three pairs of eyes met.

"To war, then, if the vote calls it."

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Nar Shadda
Hutt spaxe

"Thanks again, C'leo," said Satsi, looking in the mirror to meet her companion's shifty gaze in her reflection. She scrubbed hard at her hair, letting the alchemical dye and the solvent that removed it wash down the shitty-ass pipes of the sink. If it could be called a sink. Or water. The stuff was nearly sludge black even before it got dye it. Shadows, she hated this dirtball.

"Sure, Doll, you know it," replied C'leo uneasily, scratching at his arms. He was clearly tweaking again. She'd give him another hit before she left, just for appreciation. "Uuuh, we're, like, even now, r-right?"

"Bitch, you're still fifty thousand in deep to me, don't even start," the woman snapped, and C'leo flinched. The man was a great slicer and good with wiring tech, and he'd known where she could find one of the Principate's old salvaged warships turned dockyards. Great target for a small team to mess with.

He was also really frakking stupid about getting in trouble with his death stick habit. Satsi had been keeping him from losing what toes and teeth he had left, nevermind his head, since she was twenty.

"But," whined the Kiffar, only to silence when she turned around to glare at him. He knew on some level how much he owed her, and asking every time was more an exercise of his deteriorating memory than anything else. The man wilted and fidgeted and scratched hard enough to bleed.

"For frak's sake, 'Lo," Satsi sighed, and tossed him a death stick from her pockets. He tittered like an animal and dove for the thing, pressing his face into the filthy floor. She shivered.

I remember being like that.

The woman swallowed bile and instead focused on patching up her burns and cuts now that most of the disguise was gone. Such was her life, always slowly turning back into herself in the most miserable little refresher stalls on miserable frakking Nar Shadda, scraping off the face of Yoi, or Santhen, or whoever else that day and getting to take the injuries and banthashit home with her.

Home. That thing she didn't have anymore.

No, Satsi reminded herself, angry. You have Uji and Sammy and that is all that matters. So you got attached to a house. So what. Suck it the kark up, you stupid, pathetic coward. Suck it up and go give back as good as you got.

Well, at least she'd taken that first step today. If she was lucky, the Principate would roast the Collective's ass for this. If she wasn't, they'd figure out it was actually someone from the Brotherhood and roast them instead. Maybe if that happened, she'd at least die before she had to deal with Zujenia nagging her about 'killing innocent people' or some wishy washy kark.

Finishing up, Satsi shook herself, straightened her clothes, and painted on a smile for the mirror. This was good. The Principate could be good. She just had to do the trade talking she'd *said* she was going to and then she could go back to Selen and see if Sammy could yet kick her ass in holochess. Satsi was bloody miserable at it, so she was betting on the tutored three year old.

"Your payday is in locker 222561 at the station on the corner, 'Lo," Satsi said to her old contact, blissed out against the stalls. Then, she grabbed her bags and limped out, sore from head to toe after nearly getting herself spaced.

Maybe next time, she'd have to think things through a little more.