

Lyra colony
Lyra-3K system
37 ABY

“Unacceptable!” The tall gangly man of a governor slammed his wiry fist onto the meeting table with a dissatisfyingly meager thud. “This attack on our colony is outrageous and will not stand! The duplicity of it all! Why, I ought to...”

“Please, Governor Blazio, calm down. I –” Violet D’slan tried in her best diplomatic tone, but was cut off by the enraged governor.

“Calm? *Calm?! When your forces attack our settlement, you expect me to be calm?* I ought to have Amara escort you back to your ship and return the favor!” Jar’deon spat the last words with such force a few errant drops of spittle landed on poor Violet’s face.

Struggling not to wince any more than she had, the Arconan “diplomat” felt even more out of her depth than before, yet even so, her quick wits were working in overtime. It was just like back in the Academy, she assured herself. This was just a misunderstanding between the headmaster and a rival sorority playing pranks. Yes, that’s it. Just... do what you did then. *But succeed.*

“Governor Blazio, I must remind you that *I* represent Clan Arcona in these negotiations, *not* the Iron Navy,” she began, laying the first bricks on a long road to redemption.

“So? What has that to do with anything?” Jar’deon fumed.

“You may not be intimately familiar with our *organization*, but each Clan is – at least at the moment – its own separate entity and we hold no sway over the Iron Navy’s deployment. Were it even so that they had attacked you, which I find exceedingly implausible, then I am not the one you should be expressing your feelings to.”

“*Exceedingly implausible...*” Jar’deon sneered. “Do you think us daft? We have your identifiers on record. It *was* the Iron Navy. We have proof positive of it.”

Okay, Violet. At least he’s no longer spitting on you. That’s good, surely. Now just strike a bargain and leave.

Violet put on her most empathetically polite smile and nodded.

“I fully understand, Governor, and I would not be here if I did not think it worth your time to try and settle this.”

“Settle? There is only one way to settle this insult!” Jar’deon fumed at the awkwardly smiling woman.

“Governor, with all due respect, if it was war that we’d wanted, do you reckon we’d be talking here right now? Should I not be placing demands or dictating terms for your surrender?”

Jar’deon gave a sour look, but seemed to see the reason in her words.

“So, why are you here, then?” he inquired bitterly.

“To help you find out who did it. And prevent a war between us.”

He gave a dismissive scoff.

“I only ask you give me five days—”

“Two days.”

“Four.”

“Three, final offer.”

Violet sighed, but continued, “—give me *three* days and I will uncover the identity of the perpetrators. The *true* perpetrators.”

Jar’deon inspected the woman with his best stern gaze, trying to scrutinize her for falsehood or subterfuge, but to his dismay she seemed honest. He weighed his options. The Lyra colony was important for the Principate, yes, but an all-out war? He’d never doubted his own importance in life, but even he had to admit this outpost was probably not worth the expense of a major space and land campaign in retaliation to what, admittedly, had been fairly superficial damage.

He ran a hand over his slick black hair as he mulled it over. His options were limited, and if, that was a big but problematic ‘if’, the Arconan diplomat was correct and this had all been a ruse, it would reflect poorly on whoever was to petition the Triumvirate for aid if they pointed the Principate’s fleets at the *wrong* enemy.

“Fine,” he spat tersely. “I will give you your three days, but not one more. Provide proof, undeniable proof, that this wasn’t your ships and I will reconsider my position.”

Violet felt a conflicted sense of relief and trepidation at his words. She had gotten what she wanted, but also tied her hands. Now she would *have* to deliver.

“Thank you, Governor. I will —”

“And take Amara with you. I cannot rely on a foreign diplomat alone to verify this matter.”

“Sir?” Amara Cirrus, who until that point had been leaning idly against the back wall in her freshly dinged-up suit of armor perked up in mild protest. She’d only just gotten a taste of fighting. He couldn’t expect her to give that up in favor of shadowing this timid pencil pusher?

“Governor, I assure you that is not required.” Violet tried, but Jar’deon’s mind was clearly set as he waved off any attempts to dissuade him.

“That is my deal, *ladies*. Take it or leave it.”

“I didn’t know I *had* a choice, sir,” Amara quipped dryly, but donned her helmet all the same.

He gave her a look, but said nothing.

“Very well, we shall meet again in three days, Governor,” Violet stated as politely as she could manage and offered a diplomatic bow which he failed to return. Turning on her heels, and almost falling over as she did so, Violet hobbled out of the meeting room with her new shadow in tow.

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The hum of the shuttle’s systems died down to a faint thrumming as the craft left Lyra’s atmosphere and headed towards the waiting diplomatic vessel in high orbit. In the finely decorated passenger cabin, Violet was tapping furiously at her datapad while her helmeted *attaché* seemed to have taken a supreme interest in some minor dent in the wall beside Violet’s head.

After a few more minutes of muted staring, the Arconan broke the silence.

“Do you mind?” she asked in her best combination of polite and peeved.

“Mind what?” Amara replied.

“Staring at me.”

“No, I don’t mind it at all.”

“...”

“That’s *not* what I...” Violet stated with more annoyance in her voice, but Amara shut her up with a dismissive roll of her helmeted head.

“Fine, but I *was* told to keep an eye on you,” she reminded her.

“I figured the governor would be more interested in what I get done, rather than what I *do*.”

“He might,” Amara agreed nonchalantly. “Though speaking of which, what *are* you doing?”

Violet gulped. She had absolutely *no* clue what she was doing. Not the faintest. She’d bought herself some time, but that was the best she could muster. She was so not trained for this job.

“I’m... compiling a list of resources,” she lied through her teeth in her most convincing tone.

Amara remained silent, and unmoving.

“--aaand verifying your records...”

Still no reaction.

“--and... compiling a report?” She was grasping at straws, just like back in the Academy when pressed for an answer she had no knowledge on.

“Right,” Amara stated dismissively. “So, in plainspeak, you ain’t got kark.”

Violet stared daggers at her helmet – and then her shoulders slumped.

“Yeah,” she admitted with a defeated sigh. Just like in the Academy. “I ain’t got *kark*.” She averted her eyes in dejected shame. She’d only prolonged the inevitable, that was all she was ever good for – buying time.

Amara observed the so-called diplomat for a moment longer and then reached up to take off her helmet. When her blonde locks flowed out from beneath it, her tanned features were curved in an amused smile. A surprisingly genuine one.

“Good, because *I* have some ideas we might want to try out.”

“We?” Violet looked up in surprise, her hazel brown eyes meeting Amara’s pale blues.

“Yeah, we. Did I stutter?”

“But the governor...”

“The governor wants to avoid this conflict escalating as badly as you do, and though something tells me I’ll get to spar with your boys sometime soon anyway, I’m not particularly keen on letting the Principate be played like a fool.”

“So, you believe us? That we didn’t do it?”

Amara shrugged, her armor clanking as she did. "Maybe? Let's just say I've got experience in false flag ops..." She gave a mysterious smile that was at the same time comforting and unsettling. Yet, it was the best Violet could hope for.

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"Darling, how did your meeting go? Well, I hope seeing as there is a distinct lack of laser burns on your attire." Lucine Vasano's holographic image flickered with distortion as the remote location of the Lyra-3K system lent itself poorly for the vast quantity of HoloNet traffic it was now experiencing.

"It, uh, went, ma'am. I got us three days," Violet managed to stutter out her speaking words.

"Three days? For what?"

"For, uh, the investigation, ma'am..."

The holographic Lucine raised one immaculate holographic eyebrow.

Violet gulped.

"T-the investigation of *who* attacked them, ma'am. We've got three days to find proof, or the governor will hold us accountable."

"We?"

"Uh, I-I thought..."

"Violet, darling, what did I ask you to do when I sent you there?"

"T-to ensure the colony and by extension Principate does not think we were behind the attacks, ma'am."

"Very good, Violet. And have you done so?"

"N-no, but..."

"Then, I applaud you for your resourcefulness on the matter, but you've yet to complete my request. So, until you do, it is still very much your mess to deal with."

"But ma'am Vasano I...!"

A holographic blaster bolt sailed past the Qel-Droman Quaestor's head and Lucine spun around with saber alight in an instant, deflecting the second and a third back whence they'd come.

"Madam Vasano!" Violet gasped in shock.

"I trust you can handle the situation, envoy D'slan. I unfortunately have some more pressing concerns to attend to." Her holographic image shifted with unnatural grace though her voice did not shift one iota from its previous saccharine sweet venom. Before Violet could speak another word, the link was cut and she was left in darkness within the communications room aboard the diplomatic cruiser.

Violet stared at the cooling projector plates for a few moments more, as if hoping the holographic Lucine would suddenly return with a smile and offer her support along with a well-mannered "gotcha". But she knew that would not happen. Lucine would *never* say "gotcha".

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"So, that much of a bust?" Amara spoke up when Violet shuffled out of the comms room with even more of a slouch than usual. "Almost seems like your bosses *want* you to fail. Maybe they don't mind a war after all..."

Violet turned her gaze at the taller woman and glared daggers at her, so much so that it gave the seasoned veteran pause.

"Not. The. Time," the Arconan muttered even as her mind raced.

Think, Violet. Think. That was the only thing she'd ever been good at. There had to be a way out of this mess. Every conundrum had a solution. She just had to find it. Just like back in the Academy. Easy.

Except it was totally *not* like back in the Academy, where the worst that could happen was a shameful 0/100 and some sly remarks by her professors. Comparing that to being a catalyst for a system-wide war, made it all seem quite trivial.

Amara watched the Arconan shuffle away towards her quarters, easily following in her wake as she made a beeline for the drinks cabinet and poured herself a glass of something expensive. The Principate veteran figured she'd treat herself to a glass of the same and sat down to lounge on the sofa while Violet slumped at her desk and buried her face in her hands.

"You know...?" Amara began, but stopped when Violet let out an unintelligible groan of frustration. "...I *could* help you in this."

"How?" The word was muffled by her palms.

“Oh, did I not mention I have experience in staging these things?” she reiterated.

“So? We’re trying to de-escalate the situation, not make new attacks...” Violet slowly raised her face from its comfortable resting place and looked at the Principate attaché.

“Shame,” Amara sighed and sipped her drink. “But not what I was going to suggest.”

“Then what were you going to propose?”

“Well, the attacks *do* look like it was your people who did them. But, I can tell you there are some things that are *really* hard to fake,” she gave a smug look and sipped the drink. At least the Arconan had good taste in liquor, or was simply lucky.

“So what would that help us? Simply knowing what we’d need to prove...” Gears suddenly began turning in her head. The solution, yes. Amara could tell her *the solution* to the problem she’d been presented. Then she’d just have to work her way back from there. *Just like in the Academy.*

Her eyes lit up and she visibly perked, pushing the drink aside. Now was not the time for inebriation.

“Tell me,” Violet stated with suddenly renewed confidence. “Tell me everything.”

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What Violet had hoped to be a laundry list of options had quickly turned out to be a depressing shortlist of exceedingly improbable walls to bang her head against. Obviously whoever staged this attack wouldn’t have been stupid enough to fall for the easily verifiable mistakes in assumed identities. Oh no, that would have been far too straightforward for Violet’s luck. Instead, the options remaining on the proverbial table were a collection minutiae that were difficult, if not impossible to falsify and, consequently, equally difficult to verify.

“There’s comm code encryption, we could go with that,” Amara suggested.

“No,” Violet sighed. “I already said it to the governor, but we don’t actually have any real commonality with the Iron Fleet. I have as much access to their comm codes as you do.”

“Shame,” Amara stated and struck yet another suggestion off the dataslate.

“What about serials?” Violet pointed at the list. “You shot down a few attackers, no?”

“Yeah, but my people already combed through the wrecks. All IDs had been filed away, sometimes quite literally.”

“Doesn’t that sound suspicious to you? I mean, if someone *wanted* to stage a false-flag operation like this, that’s *precisely* what they would do.”

Amara shrugged. “Yeah, but a lack of evidence isn’t really evidence, you know? Won’t cut it, I’m afraid.”

Another dismaying exchange, another suggestion crossed off the ever shortening list.

“Well, we’re really down to two options here,” Amara stated after another few minutes of defeatism. “Either we find some of the people involved and *make* them confess, or we prove that the Iron Navy could not have done it by getting alibis for each and every asset they have.”

Violet looked over the list and came to the same conclusion. Neither sounded particularly achievable. In fact, they both sounded equally impossible. Where would she even begin looking for the perpetrators? Or would she rather approach the Iron Navy’s Admiralty and ask kindly for a detailing of their every single asset?

“So, which one you gonna pick, ambassador?” Amara asked with a lesser hint of amusement than her choice of words might have implied. It was clear she too had expected more out of this.

“I... don’t know,” she admitted for the second time today. It was becoming an alarming habit of hers. “Let me just... I’ll make a quick call,” she reached over to the comms console and punched in Lucine’s ID. The uplink took longer than usual to establish a connection, and after the timer maxed out, the polite error message informed her that the person she had dialed could not be reached.

“Sithspit,” Violet cursed under her breath. Well, it wasn’t like Lucine would have offered much in the shape of assistance. She’d made it *quite* clear she had other matters to attend to. If she was even still alive.

Oh, she would be. Most assuredly. Violet never had *that* good luck.

“So, what now?” Amara voiced the Arconan’s own thoughts.

She looked at the comms panel for a moment and then reached for it again. Protocol might have dictated to escalate her query, but escalation was precisely what she wanted to avoid. So she selected another name and tried again.

The uplink cycled, it cycled for a long time, and then suddenly the grainy image of a crouching Twi’lek appeared on the pale blue hologram.

“Vhat? Vho is this? How didt you get my ID?” Tali Sroka hissed into the comms piece, clearly displeased to be disturbed whilst doing... something or another? Violet had no clue or time to even begin guessing. Her superiors were – an odd bunch, for sure.

“Apologies, Miss Sroka. I am Violet D’slan, recently appointed as envoy of Clan Arcona for...”

“Ah, the summit. Yes, I readt the file,” the Twi’lek assured her in a voice that made her doubt she had. *“Vhat do you vant?”*

“Help, ma’am. I’m trying to uncover the identity of those who attacked the Principate and I need information on –”

There were distorted hisses over the line, like people shushing the Twi’lek and pressing her to end the call.

The holographic Tali waved them off and returned to Violet. *“I’dt like to help, but I can’t. A bit busy. If there’s something you needt, ask Ha. She knows.”* There were some more annoyed words and what sounded suspiciously like Consul Bleu cursing at the Twi’lek before the feed was cut. Today was getting weirder by the minute.

“Ha,” Violet mused when the link was cut.

“Huh,” Amara agreed.

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Finding out who this Ha person was, took them the better part of the day. But in the end, Violet managed to track down the somewhat eccentric Kaminoan owner of the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Company. It also became fairly clear that the outfit had closer ties to House Qel-Droma than might officially be stated.

Gaining a hold of her, however, proved to be an even greater challenge than that. Navigating the automatic menus of the ALaS Co HoloNet receptionist droid almost killed her, but in the end, Violet managed, somehow, someway, to get a direct number to her ship.

“Yumni Ha,” the Kaminoan replied as her palid visage was rendered in a bizarrely more vibrant color in the icy blue of the holographic image. It was clear she was currently in the helm of a spaceship and her attention seemed completely focused on what was at hand rather than Violet.

A trend, the Arconan noted, among those she had to rely upon for help.

“Miss Ha? Hello, I am—”

“Envoy Violet D’slan, yes. How may I help you, miss D’slan?”

Violet stuttered something incoherent for a moment, her train of thought thoroughly derailed. Apparently at least *someone* in this organization read their memos.

“Yes, well, I would need to get my hands on the Iron Navy’s fleet database. Or more specifically, information about their ships’ positions during a certain timeframe.”

There was silence on the other end of the line and for a moment, Violet thought the image had frozen as the Kaminoan remained utterly immobile.

“I see. And how would you be paying for this considerable parcel of information?”

Right, payment. There was a thing she hadn’t thought about. She’d figured they all served Arcona, but apparently ALaS Co was still depressingly *for profit*.

“Well, uh, I am sure the Consul’s office...”

“Unless you have the authority to issue debt in name of the Consul’s office, they will not. Rest assured, Envoy D’slan.”

“What of House Qel-Droma? You are an ally and...”

“Preferred partner,” Yumni corrected. *“I prefer the term preferred partner, mainly because it is the correct one. As for credit on the House, I am afraid Madam Vasano was quite insistent that all future commissions from ALaS Co run through her desk first.”*

Of course she was, Violet thought, dismayed. Was there anything she could do, or was she expected to prevent a *frakking* war with both hands tied behind her back? Did these people *want* to get everyone killed? The possibility seemed suddenly surprisingly realistic.

“Is there *anything* I can do to come to an arrangement here? I’m on a schedule...”

For the first time since their conversation began, the Kaminoan deigned to look at Violet and the expression that her plain, featureless face wore was that of incredulity. Oh yes, let the diplomat lecture the logistician about *schedules*.

“I’m afraid your request does not match your funds, Envoy D’slan. If there is nothing further, I—”

“Please!” the cry for help came suddenly and unbidden, an animalistic response of a woman at the end of her tether. She didn’t know if this Ha person could even help her, but for a moment it

had seemed like she could. And if this too turned out to be a dead end, she had no more recourse. "Please," Violet begged again. "I don't want to fail my mission."

The Kaminoan remained silent, then reached out and tapped a rune on her control console, picked up a tall glass of water from a gyro-stabilized cupholder and turned her attention to the Human. *"Explain. You have forty seconds."*

She wasted the first three of those precious seconds processing what had just happened, before bursting into a verbal avalanche of an explanation, barely drawing breath as she sought to expel every last important bit of information about her predicament within her allotted time.

Thirty-seven seconds later, she almost collapsed.

The holographic Kaminoan sipped her water.

"So, your goal is to prove our non-involvement in the attack and thus prevent a war between the Brotherhood – including Arcona – and the Severian Principate. Correct?"

"Y-yes," Violet panted, still out of breath.

"Then I may be able to assist you, though not in the manner that you requested."

She raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"You mentioned a Principate attaché with you?"

Amara rose up from her seat on the couch and walked into the hologram and waved her hand at the Q-tip shaped alien.

"Principate *attaché* here," she stated bluntly.

"Did your sensors register the radiation prints of the capital assets used in the attack?"

Amara had most decidedly not been expecting such a deep-diving question right off the bat and she visibly struggled to answer.

"Err, yeah. I think so, why?"

"The placement of each Iron Navy warship is unknown, but the composition of their fleet is not. I am sure the Principate has invested their own effort into finding that out, have they not?"

"Yes...?" Amara wasn't sure where this was going, but it seemed the alien had a plan, for once.

“I do not have ready access to the locations of each Iron Navy vessel, but I do have the ability to provide you their radiation profiles.”

“That’s, uh...” Amara looked at Violet who shrugged. She was totally out of depth here and didn’t even know what the two were talking about. “...acceptable, I guess.”

“Very well, I will forward the data in a day’s time, with updated signatures and verification of the data quality. In the meantime, Envoy D’slan, I recommend you petition the Arconan diplomatic corps for emergency funding. State clause 1155 – Prevention of imminent calamity.”

The link was cut.

Violet was not sure what to feel. Joy, at the prospect of maybe having prevented the unpreventable. Or dread, that the unpreventable was so commonplace her employers had its own code for it.

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True to her word, Violet received a sizeable data packet by the next day, containing engine readings and other radiation profiles of each and every Iron Navy warship, along with close-in pictures and verification stamps to ensure the validity of the information. As she scrolled over the rows of data that meant absolutely nothing to her, she began to ponder how the Kaminoan had come to possess all this.

It was while scrolling through the images that it struck her. They had all been taken from supply shuttles, various cargo ships and other merchant craft that frequented the same ports as Iron Navy vessels. It wasn’t exactly espionage, per se, but damn close. And as she checked the time stamps, it became clear this operation had been going on for quite a while.

It was all quite bewildering and, upon realizing how often she’d had couriers bring her parcels, *distressing* how much information such mundane and innocuous service providers might actually have of their customers...

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“So you see, Governor Blazio, each and every capital asset involved in the incident failed to match up with *any* known Iron Navy vessels. Indeed, they seemed to have been tuned to a quite different main frequency altogether,” Violet spoke out the scripted words she’d re-rehearsed before attending this most crucial of meetings.

Jar’deon looked at the evidence he’d been provided and seemed equally out of his depth as Violet had been when presented with the same. After making some important looking scrolling

and clicking on his datapad and giving some thoughtful murmurs for good measure, he turned to Amara who offered no objections.

“Well then, Envoy D’slan, it appears my superiors will have something new to bring to the table at the summit,” the lanky man stated in his best benevolently important voice. “And it seems we may yet owe you an apology for undue accusations.”

“No no, Governor. That is quite unnecessary. Anyone might have made that same judgement given the state of the affairs...” Violet played her part as good little diplomat. This was a part of the dance she’d already grown at least somewhat accustomed to.

Jar’deon nodded and offered a quick smile. “I thank you for your time, Envoy D’slan, and I hope you did not find Amara’s presence too obtrusive.”

“No, no. In fact, it was her help that made all of this possible. So I thank you for assigning her with me and of course, Amara herself for all her hard work.”

The soldier had chosen to don her helmet at this point and remained as inscrutable as the moment they’d first met.

“Don’t mention it,” she stated bluntly from behind the plastoid visor.

And with a few more diplomatic platitudes for a farewell, Violet left the meeting chambers with a tingling sensation in her belly. She’d actually made it! She’d done the impossible and been the diplomat she had never expected herself to be. If only her old professors could see her now!

“Just like at the Academy,” she chuckled to herself as she headed for the shuttle.

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In the meeting room freshly Violet-less, Amara pulled off her helmet and turned to Jar’deon.

“Ugh, we shouldn’t have toyed with her like that,” she grunted disapprovingly. “Girl’s barely fresh out of a training bra and they threw her in here? It wasn’t even funny how easily she coughed up all that information.”

“Perhaps, but quite an odd time for *you* of all people to grow a conscience,” the governor replied. “Or did you take a shine to her while you two were sharing a ship together?” he added with a teasing tone.

“Shove it, Blazio. You know I don’t swing that way,” Amara spat back. “Just expecting a fair fight, that’s all.” She donned her helmet and left, leaving the governor with his fresh prize; the

valuable Iron Navy data and a host of other insider information about Clan Arcona and her key players.