

Twilight crept slowly over the jungle, rousing predators from their shadowy dens. The beaming sun fell, the moon rose, and the time for the hunt began. It was a constant that held true across the galaxy, from the dunes of Iridonia, to the jungle floor of Lyra. Darkness was danger, a murky shroud, concealing fang, dagger, and dancing arrow alike.

But, if one knew how to use it...darkness could be bent to their advantage. The Brotherhood wouldn't let that chance slip away. And, besides; Sera had never been afraid of the dark.

"Three count. They're splitting up. Kaern, tail the one going off on his own. Jath, with me."

"Gotcha, captain." The zabrak nodded at her human commander, breaking off from the trio to tail the lonely collective agent. Emere knew what she was about; calm, professional, and efficient, the human was an obvious choice to lead their little hunt, with Eilen as her second. But, Sera had spent her life tracking prey. Even if she had a tenth of her compatriots' training, she wouldn't lose the trail. She wouldn't let them down.

Shooting a glance at the stars, at her ancestors, mostly hidden by the thick canopy, Sera slowed her breathing, and set off into the darkness of the forest.

Their task was simple; Collective ground and air forces had been harassing the central Lyra Colony for days, striking commercial centers without warning, and vanishing just as soon as they had appeared, all under the guise of the Iron Fleet. They wanted the Principate to believe that the Brotherhood was attacking them, to break the negotiations that had been so painstakingly crafted for weeks by the grandmaster's diplomats. It was an ingenious ruse, that had the Brotherhood scrambling to respond.

Their team -Sera, Emere, and Eilen- were part of that response, tasked with tracking down where the Collective forces had been hiding out on Lyra's surface. Like the nexu of the dunes, they were supposed to track them down, pillage as much useful information as possible...and leave one, massive bonfire behind once they'd gotten what they needed.

At a half-crouch, Sera stalked her prey, trailing behind him at a comfortable, easy to keep-up distance. In the dark, she was just barely able to make out his outline, dimly illuminated by the sun's dying rays, and the moon's growing silvery-light. She'd first picked up the trail for her team some two hours before, at the bare edge of Lyra Colony's shattered perimeter defenses. Now, almost 8 clicks into the rainforest's interior, they *had* to be getting close...to what exactly, Sera wasn't sure.

What in her ancestor's names did she know about war? She knew fighting; for fun, for honor, to defend herself. But fighting to kill? She could count the amount of people that she'd killed in her entire life on two hands. Fighting the Collective? She hardly knew what the Collective was; she hardly even knew what the *Brotherhood* was. In searching for her brother, she had plunged herself into an entirely new galaxy, and jumped in head *katkaran* first. Who was she kidding,

pretending like this was just some normal hunt. This wasn't Iridonia, and the man she was hunting was *not* helpless prey. Far from it; most likely, he was a hardened soldier, a killer. A predator, all of his own.

Suddenly, Sera snapped back to attention. There was another light, glowing through the treeline, very faintly. A larger one. It looked like they had found their hideout; which meant it was time to get rid of her guide. The zabrak raised her Model 57, and drew the reliable-old hunting sight to the back of her target's head. Her finger squeezed the trigger...

The silencer module, a brand new, fantastic piece of equipment, did its job well. The flash of crimson light was almost totally quiet; just a faint *kzzzk*, and the soldier tumbled limply into the verdant brush. Grimacing, Sera padded her way over to the corpse, turning it over onto its back.

"Ket kotkinnien, ankar."

"Go to rest, hunter."

The prayer for the dead man was whispered softly, the guttural tones of the zabraki tongue almost musical. Then, frowning, Sera started rooting through the man's pockets; perhaps he had a holodisc, or something else that could be useful. She was proud of herself, keeping her composure like that; it had been clean, quiet, and...

...there were footsteps behind her. And a voice.

"Who're you? What are you doing here? Put your hands up!"

The zabrak froze, refusing to move. The footsteps moved closer, and all Sera could do was thank the ancestors that he didn't have a flashlight. If he saw the corpse, if he realized; she would join her prey in the soil.

"Stand up! I said, stand up, and put your hands-"

The collective soldier's call cut off in a gargle as a blaster bolt took him in the back of the neck; his dark-eyes widened in shock, his face going pale. Then, wordlessly, he slumped to the forest floor alongside his comrade.

Emere and Eilen stood behind him.

"Watch your karking back next time, Kaern, or we won't show up to pull your horn-headed backside out of the fire. C'mon."

The human bustled on past Sera, towards the lights beyond the treeline, scowling darkly. Eilen just shrugged, giving the zabrak a sheepish smile. "You alright, Sera? That guy sorta snuck up on you, huh?"

"Yeah...yeah. Did you guys...uh...handle...your group?"

The hybrid nodded at her, then motioned towards the outpost ahead of them.

"Yeah. C'mon; let's go, before we piss her off even more."

-

The compound was small, compact, and easily defensible, complete with a 20-meter landing pad. It appeared to be one of the abandoned republican outposts, scattered through the jungle...though this particular locale didn't seem abandoned at all. Rather, it shined with light, and exhibited obvious signs of habitation. Outside, bored guards stood watch at doors and windows, yawning into their elbows. E-Web automatic blaster cannons had been placed strategically throughout, alongside crates of ammunition and explosive ordinance, ready for any sort of offensive. Most worrying of all, however, were the TIE-fighters; two of them, parked up on the outpost's pad. They bore the marks of the Iron Fleet.

It seemed like the wamprat-den they had been looking for had turned out to be a krayt nest. Now...now they needed to figure out what to do about it. The zabrak turned towards Emere, giving her a questioning look, but the human appeared to be pondering just as deeply as she was. That main building would be where all the data was, but that also happened to be where all the *people* were. It was like hunting loppreds, out in the east of Iridonia's badlands; if presented with a threat, the whole herd would charge, making it nigh-on impossible to take down any good number. But, if you caused a distraction, made a stir, they would charge off towards nothing...leaving the rear of the pack vulnerable.

The zabrak's eyes trailed away from the buildings, towards the weapons caches. She had an idea forming. A bad one, probably...but she would just have to wait and see.

-

Thirty minutes later, Sera lay waiting in the brush, as close as she could get to the compound's main building without being seen from the door. Eilen was beside her, blaster in one hand, computer spike in the other. She would handle breaking into their tech, sweeping up whatever she could from them. Sera would go for the physical; swiping cameras, holodiscs, holoprojectors, and taking pictures along the way. Whatever she could get. Emere? Well, Emere's job was to...

A sudden shockwave rattled through Sera's bones, and the night became very bright, *very* quickly. A tongue of fire licked up into the air...and then, there was a terrible shrill creak of metal as the landing pad bent, and crumpled into the jungle, throwing the TIE fighters into the trees.

There was shocked silence, and a stir within the main building as Collective soldiers started from their beds, rushing out towards the source of the commotion. Sera and Eilen, safely hidden in the brush, watched them pass by, completely unawares. A short time later, the fuel cells in the TIE fighters detonated, the two thunderous explosions scattering even more debris and fire over the compound.

That was the point at which Sera and Eilen had decided to make their move, now that the main building was almost certain to be mostly abandoned. Which it was, for the most part; they only needed to put down two rear guards as they made their quiet way in. One got a good crack in the head by Eilen's quarterstaff, dropping him effectively. The other...well, K'thri was a remarkably good form for introducing people to the taste of the bottom side of a boot.

Now mostly on their own, the pair made quick work of the first floor. Eilen snapped up hard drives, while Sera snapped pictures of any incriminating evidence she came across; mainly, several Captain Crimson posters, proudly displayed in the soldiers' bunks. Then, they made their way up to the second floor...and stopped dead.

Standing before them was a massive holoprojector, taking up most of the second floor. It was displaying...Lyra. A full map of the colony, speckled with violet blips...increasing in density the closer they got to where the main Lyra Colony stood. It was that part of the map that had both of them...well, shocked.

There was a battle plan, there; lists of ground battalions, ship groupings, coordinates for orbital attacks...all targeted not at the commercial or industrial parts of the colony that had been targeted thus far...but at the residential center of the colony. They weren't just going after strategic targets anymore.

The Collective was going to target Lyra's citizens. They would force the Principate to go against the Brotherhood, by hitting them where it hurt the most...unless they could be stopped.

"Eilen...holy *katka*, grab all of this. Download the whole damn map. I'm gonna...well..." Sera pulled her holocam out from her pack, and snapped several pictures. Then, rushing, she went to grab whatever she could find; several holodiscs, what appeared to be some kind of comlink, and another holoprojector.

Then, she started on the last step of their plan; dropping off the rest of their detonite charges.

-

Somewhere behind them, the compound exploded; this time, the blast caught onto the ammunition and explosive caches, sparking one massive fireball that blazed through the jungle. Sera paid no attention. She was looking over the holopics that she'd taken, thinking, mulling it all over. She was shocked, honestly. Sickened.

She understood, now. Why it was so important to beat the Collective. To fight them. Things were much simpler now; she was fighting against people willing to bomb homes and families to get what they wanted. To kill the newfound friends of her house, without hesitation.

She didn't know if she got the Brotherhood yet. But...it didn't really matter. Her House...Qel Droma was her tribe now. She could understand that. She could understand a war against the honorless, to clear their name. To protect the innocent, and the helpless, back in Lyra.

Their hunt had turned out to be fruitful, afterall. But, now they had bigger problems. Now...it looked like they were going to be hunting *much* bigger game.