

Lyra Colony didn't have a prison.

Satsi wasn't surprised, really. The whole city was still being built — and now half of it was blown up, thanks, Oligard and company — and the colonists were a lot more focused on the necessities a decade or two in. Nobody's priority was in dedicating time and effort to something like long term incarceration when they still had desalination plants and hydrofarms and schools to build. Besides, they didn't have *crime*, not on perfect little Lyra. Or so had said the governor and his campaign, apparently, as she found when she been digging for information.

Thinking of Blazio made a vein above her eye pulse so hard she saw red, but she didn't have anything to do with the anger. It was her own damn fault for being so sloppy anyway. Of course he'd crossed her — she was an outsider with the barest excuse as a mercenary, swanning in and trying to convince him that the very things they'd all seen were fabrications. And, moreover, he was a *politician*. Of *course* he'd done what would look the most decisive and glamorous and "capture" two whole terrorists with his wiles alone. It wasn't that far off from a scheme she would have pulled.

She would have punched the wall, but they'd had stuncuffs on hand. Frakkers.

Satsi glanced around again for lack of anything better to do. Her little "holding cell" was more of a storage room that they'd stuck a couple metal cages in, the kind that transported livestock and, by the faint lingering smell, had probably done just that whenever the colonists had first settled. It was at least climate controlled, probably for the sake of whatever was in all the various crates stacked about, and when there wasn't fighting going on outside somewhere, it was quiet. They fed her and left her water, and she wasn't being beaten, tortured, raped, *or* drugged, so really, it wasn't so bad, not compared to her previous experiences being held against her will.

Good job, Lyra Colony.

On the other hand: frakking handcuffed in a box while the Force knew what was going on out there with the Collective and the clans and the damn Principate. The woman ground her teeth in frustration and scratched at her palms again, working nails underneath the bandages they'd applied. The pain of reopening the burn sores there kept her from *absolutely losing it*.

Satsi had already discarded the plan of just dislocating her thumb to slip the cuffs. If she broke it instead, which was infuriatingly more likely, given her already injured hands, then the resulting swelling could cut off circulation entirely, and then she'd really be screwed. Who knew how often they'd come to check on her or if they'd listen if she started screaming in pain? The fact that they'd treated her well so far didn't really mean much.

Though the lock on her cage door was mechanical, she had no tools with which to pick it, and again, *her hands*. Fiddly, tremor-fine work like that was beyond her at the moment. And she

couldn't just brute force a door by ramming her shoulder into it or kicking it when the whole durasteel box was made to contain bull banthas.

So, essentially, her options were to wait patiently for her captors or to talk her way out with a guard, which seemed unlikely, given how they were responding to her advances or bribes so far — burning her bridges earlier to deliver M'eero had really karked her over. Even that office clerk she'd seduced had come forward to admit the whole thing, so not even propositions were working.

By midday Satsi had a migraine throbbing behind one eye in the form of stabbing pain from scowling so much.

Her brooding was interrupted by the lone door opening, and she glanced up, expecting to see one of the LyraSec members bringing her lunch, but instead met the pissed off blue eyes of the boss herself.

"Cirrus," Satsi drawled. "Or do you prefer Chief? What can I do for you? Tea? A seat? Oh, wait."

Amara seemed only slightly aggravated by her sarcasm. "I've come to update you on your case."

"And here I am without my lawyer, oh no."

The other Human didn't relax from her soldier's pose, only scowling harder.

"Quiet or I won't be telling you anything at all. This is a courtesy, not an obligation."

Satsi grit her teeth.

"I apologize," she forced out pleasantly enough. "Go on."

"It appears you were correct, that the attacks perpetrated against us were not committed by the Brotherhood."

"About frakking time." Satsi exclaimed and stood up, but Cirrus' indigo eyes only narrowed at her movement.

"Don't misunderstand. Just because we've been informed the Brotherhood isn't behind this does not mean we know *who is*. Further investigation is needed."

"I already told you—"

"Yes, yes, the Collective, so you claim. But that is for us to determine, not you. And besides, you still assaulted and abducted that man—"

"The damn enemy—"

"—*allegedly*, and you threatened the governor, and lied about your identity and your interests here."

Well, frak.

"So you'll be staying in our custody until this is all resolved, at which point we'll determine a trial by peer to decide what's done with you. The Principate dispenses judicial power to prosecute to its member states as seen fit, so your life is in our hands, not the Trimuvate's." And *oh*, there was something there, in her voice. Bitterness? Jealousy? Curious. With her bosses? With the Principate's government? Still, it wasn't like she was in a position to pick at the little tell at the moment. "I'm personally hoping for the firing squad. Better than my men got, but it'll have to do. Have a good day, now."

"Bitch," Satsi hissed at her retreating back.

For that, no one ever brought food, either.

-X-

Her next few sentient interactions were with the next rotation of guards. The one after that, however, in the middle of the night, was another surprise.

The door didn't unlock. Instead, a blue blade of plasma erupted through it, then a green one, on the opposite side. She watched with jaw *dropped* from the floor as they moved slowly up and around, in sync, meeting in the middle and trailing burning orange lines of molten metal. Then, they withdrew, and a moment later, the cut-out section of the door groaned and fell forward. The woman flinched in anticipation of the crash, but none came; instead the panel was held suspended by an invisible force, and two familiar faces were poking around the gap to peer in.

"Master Tameike— I mean, Miss Satsi?" called Corazon Ya-ir. Satsi stared as he performed a graceful, leaping pirouette over the door panel and landed silently, approaching her cage, while behind him his husband, and her former apprentice, gently lowered the door from his telekinetic grasp and stomped over it.

"Hey, coach," Ruka Tenbriss Ya-ir greeted, the taller Mirialan nodding next to the Pantoran Jedi.

Satsi found her voice. And it was furious.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" she erupted, snarling, springing up, her fingers flexing like claws in their cuffs. The last time she'd seen the boys, she'd been watching their ship take off, as they'd promised to take her goddamn daughter somewhere marginally safer than Arcona's homeworld, right next door to the Principate systems. "Where's Sammy?! Don't you tell me you brought her—"

"Of course not," snapped her former apprentice, then more gently, "you know we wouldn't endanger a kid, coach. Nah, we dropped her on Kias with Cor's family."

"Why the FRAK would you do that? What happened to staying with her? What happened to staying away from the war this time?! DAMMIT, Ruka, you—"

"Please don't yell at him," Cora interrupted, and though the words were polite and his delivery hardly threatening, his stance was firm. The kid had grown a lot since he'd first become Turel's Padawan, a long way from the soft noble he used to be. They were both technically war veterans now. Soldiers. Gods and Shadows—

"...sorry," Satsi murmured, and for once meant it. She breathed out through her teeth, trying to force herself to unclench marginally. "Explain. Please."

"Well, Samantha started having a nightmare while we were en route, and then she woke up and said you were in trouble. We didn't think much of it, of course, just comforted her. But she was insistent. She kept saying she had a 'bad feel' about her mother and father, and, well..." Cora glanced at his husband.

Ruka picked up the tale. "We told her we'd check it out, since, like, frang— that stuff happens, right? We both sense things like that about each other and stuff so who's to say she was wrong? So we planned to at least call and check in with Arc after we landed. But then the Inquisitorial director sent out a broadcast, all systems. Said the Collective were sending assassins after the clan leaders. We were worried about you, between Sam and that."

"Thanks, Greenie, but I'm not in charge anymore."

"That doesn't necessarily mean you wouldn't be a target if it was known you were in the system," Cora interjected far too reasonably. "Previous Consuls are figureheads too. They have just as much to gain from your death as from the standing Consul or Proconsul's. And irregardless, there are still people in danger here. Of course we came. It's our duty to help them!"

She just resisted the urge to scoff at him, because after everything the two had done, they didn't deserve that. People like them, believers, had died already for it. Atyiru had died for it. For—

*"Maybe you're right. Maybe we who hold the Force are no more than destroyers. But I want to be a destroyer who can save."*

Satsi grit her teeth again. *Damn you, Atty*, she thought. Even three years gone, the Miraluka had never stopped haunting any of them. She'd been too good for that. And these boys were too good too.

But at least that good had meant they got her kid somewhere safe and were obviously here to *help her*.

She sagged. "Okay. Okay, fine. Thanks. For coming back for me. I'm not. Used to that."

They shared one of their looks.

"Always, coach," Ruka answered gruffly, then ignited his saber again. Cora followed suit, and together they repeated the process with the door to cut a hole in her cage while she stood back and watched the spitting, sparking plasma dripping slag nervously. In roughly four minutes, from when they'd first entered to the moment she stepped out and one of them slashed through her stuncuffs, she was free.

"Let's go," Ruka murmured, while Cora closed his eyes and seemed to be busy doing...sparkfinger sensey things. Looking for nearby enemies, maybe "Info dump said the others are aboard that *Ninox* ship. We can grab them too and get the kriff outta here."

But Satsi was already shaking her head. "I have to go do what I can to keep this damn alliance from frakking up any more."

"Who you plan on talking to now? They already arrested you."

"No talking. I tried playing nice, kiddo. I'm gonna go smash in some skulls."

Again, the boys shared a glance.

"Is that the best idea?" Cora tried, but Satsi gently cuffed him over the head, earning her a sharp bark from her apprentice.

"Oi!"

"I'm going. Believe me, I ain't the rescue type. That's your job, and...you've been gettin' good at it, with the Lotus and *stmenuff*. I'm proud of you and I'm grateful you found me. Just. Be safe out there, you hear me? If it's you or those diplomats or whoever, you pick you. Just— run."

Both boys — young *men*, really — smiled at her, one quiet, one big and bright.

"You know we won't," they said, almost over each other.

*Damn you*, she thought, loving them fiercely for how too good they were and wanting nothing more than to stick them in a locked room with bomb-resistant walls. Instead she just hugged them each with one arm, hard, and then they all got their goddamn good sense back and focused on the important part of *escaping*.

Small mercies, they didn't have to spend forever looking for her gear and risk getting caught. The Force-Users could sense kyber crystals, and the boys were able to lead her to a makeshift evidence lockup in the little compound where Blazio's — or rather, Amara Cirrus' — goons had tossed all her things, including her brother's old lightsaber. She donned her armor and weapons and then the two partners led her out, laughably easily with their powers, avoiding any guards completely and befuddling the only one they came across that they couldn't avoid.

"You didn't see us. You checked on the prisoner and everything is fine. You're going back to your patrol," Ruka said with two fingers to the guard's temple and a slightly nauseous twist to his mouth. Satsi looked away.

"I checked the prisoner and everything's fine. I'm resuming my patrol," echoed the guard, and went off.

They got outside and left the main area of the colony, heading for the landing area that acted as Lyra Colony's spaceport. It was a mess— obviously there had been a skirmish here recently. They exchanged a few more relevant tidbits about the developing situation in Lyra sector before the pair raced for their ship, tucked behind a nearby cropping of oceanic rock. She watched the Odanite-marked shuttle lift off and grimaced. There was no way she had time to hunt down wherever they'd stuck her ship, if it was even still intact. One of the Principate's fighters would have to do. At least the stolen comm from the mind-tricked guard allowed her a live feed of their chatter.

Her disbelief and exasperation grew as she listened to the talk. They were planning to go engage their own rogue people. Fantastic.

It did, however, offer her an opportunity. There was a squadron scrambling in less than an hour. All she had to do was find a spot to hide, wait, and hope no one went to check her cell before then.

Maybe the Force that everyone always fawned over was on her side, *for once*, pft, right, because her next forty minutes were uneventful. She watched from behind some barrels of fuel as various LyraSec colonists meant to support the militia loaded into a small group of patchwork group of starfighters and frigates. Eyeing the one nearest her, Satsi crept up as quietly as she

could in her heavy armor. The pilot started to turn, spotting her, and she tackled her, looping her arms around her neck in a choke hold.

A few seconds, and her dead weight filled Satsi's arms. She let her down and looped her hands under the pilot's armpits, dragging them back into her own hiding place before engaging the seals on her helmet and climbing into the fighter.

They took off in short order, without Satsi having to confirm codes or ident or anything — *peaceful freaking colonists*. Evidently not all went well when Chief Cirrus wasn't directly involved. She flew with the squad in formation until they approached the station outside Thumvis Shipyards, then broke off quickly and angled for the magfield-shielded hangar instead of joining the fighter screen of Severian-and-Collective on Severian action outside it. No way in hell was she dogfighting with them; she was no fighter pilot.

The squadron Sergeant began screaming obscenities at her for deviating, and she flicked off her comms relay, not wanting to hear it.

-X-

Getting into the hangar of Platform Delphi was easier than it should have been, but that's where any ease stopped. Satsi had to shoot and punch and drag her way through any infuriating number of Collective zealots, but at least most of the 5th Fleet seemed a little less put together; or perhaps just more restrained. They were, after all, just conscripted, law-abiding citizens serving their military tenures, and had already been through an assault. Compared to a bunch of frothing fanatics, it wasn't so bad.

They did, however, still try to shoot her or detain her. Anyone not with Captain Chelsie Crimson, the reported leader of this particular Liberation Front regiment, or the 5th Fleet was apparently an enemy. And Satsi had to take extra care not to go hurting them too much. Even if they were mutinying, they were still Principate, and it was probably better that she didn't kill them. She needed a good non-lethal target.

It was suddenly a terrible day for kneecaps.

And also elbows, but they were smaller, and Satsi's hands were still frakked up, so. Kneecaps it was.

She wasn't totally successful. Sometimes she was shooting soldiers in the gut or chest, or had to break necks or anything else just to get out of a hallway alive. But she *tried*. Like Cora and Ruka were trying. Like everyone of the clans and everyone back home would be trying to make sure this whole alliance didn't go from bad to worse. So she had to keep going.

Trying frakking *sucked*.

Eventually, after finding herself lost in a wing that was obviously being used as a medical ward, she stumbled, literally, into the Crimson Captain herself. The other woman's immediately recognizable armor was covered in dents and scorch marks and barely discernible blood, but she was standing tall, and their eyes met briefly through the slits in each of their helmet visors.

Maybe they would've fought. Maybe Crimson would've even beaten her. But this wasn't the time for it, and while Crimson had had her weapons holstered as she returned to the medbay, her sentence about checking on her troops cutting off with their collision, Satsi still had her pistol in her hand.

The Arconan moved the muzzle inward where it was smashed between their bodies and pulled the trigger until the clip clicked empty.

The Collective Captain jolted with each shot, wheezing, but one of them had to have at least gotten through her armor, because her weight fell forward, crashing into Satsi. The Human staggered, nearly crushed, and her knee crumpled under the sudden introduction of kilograms of armor and dying person.

The soldiers that had been accompanying her cried out in despair and anger, and were quick to try and pull their leader to her feet, to defend her, to fill Satsi with holes. Satsi changed her grip, wrapping her other arm around the body to hold it close and use it as a meaty shield through the first surprised, enraged salvo of blasterfire. Agony flared up her arm as bolts ate through it, but she still jerked her hand out, throwing the emptied gun at one man and then scrambling for her belt with the other.

"BACK OFF OR WE ALL GO!" she shouted, but it was more like a wheeze, filled with pain and weak of breath. She held the thermal detonator up threateningly, eyes wheeling, panic a tight and high knot in her chest. This was *the Collective* she was dealing with. People *living to die*. Just like she once had. And she'd just killed their poster child in front of them.

One of the soldiers screamed and leapt, as if he wanted to be on top of the grenade when it went, or maybe strangle the life out of her with his bare hands.

"UNTIL EVERY CHAIN IS BROKEN!" he yowled.

Bluff called, she could do little as limbs tangled and struggled and blows rained down on her. It was a mess, with Crimson's body still half in the way, being shoved off of her. Her shot-up arm hung useless to one side as she tried to punch back or block with the other, grenade still in hand.

*Sammy, Uji—* she thought.



*Sorry.*

And then three shots rang on clear as day. The blows stopped coming. Everything went quiet, just for a second, beside the sound of her gurgling and gasping.

And then footsteps, and once again, for the third time, Satsi was staring blearily up at Amara Cirrus' blue eyes from the floor.

"You really like trouble, don't you?" she growled, but sighed and waved for someone, saying, "get her on her feet, we need all the help we can get, here," and it was the last thing Satsi was aware of before one of the LyraSec loyalists tried to help her up, and the resulting pain from her arm sent her nosediving straight into black oblivion.