

Objective 3: TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE CHAOS CAUSED BY THE ATTACK ON LYRA

The attack on Lyra has thrown the system into chaos as the Principate seeks justice and the Brotherhood and Collective blame each other. Take advantage of this standoff to settle old grudges or seize strategic advantages for you or your clan. Where this occurs and how is up to the writer. Writing for this prompt makes a three-way war between the Brotherhood, the Principate, and the Collective MORE likely.

SNAPSHOT

WARNING: This story contains lyrics from the theme song of the show *True Detective*. Because it fit. Enjoy.

About Damn Time

Ascendancy, Captain's Quarters

Lyra-3K-a system

37 ABY

She was all alone again. Alone and drinking. In the corner of her captain's quarters, she had arranged an easy chair and ottoman so that she reclined facing the viewing portal, where she could see the rest of the Ascendant Fleet poised and ready for the inevitable confrontation. As she stared at the mosaic of Star Destroyers, cruisers, and fighters, decorating the cosmos as if they, too, were stars, she felt the acid in her stomach churn and writhe like the angry contents of a cauldron. It was both a reaction to the whiskey and her own restless, unstable thoughts.

Ronovi had not considered revenge for a very, very long time.

She thought she had overcome it, pushed aside the past demons that crowded around the thistles of her booze and ire-addled mind. She thought she was beyond what she now considered, "petty squabbling." But what had happened to her in the past was certainly more than that. She had lost power. Lost prestige. Lost favorability in a way that she truly believed she would never recover. Even on the brink of another war, where she once again sat on the Dread Throne of Plagueis and helmed its mighty flagship, she firmly believed that she had only been made Consul again out of pity. And she hated that.

So, what to do? Should she rekindle the flames of wrath again? Regress back to a state of being where vengeance was as strong to her palate as whiskey was? No: this was foolish. Ronovi was done with her lapses in her otherwise admirable intellect, something that many of her opponents took for granted. She felt her shoulders sink into the cushions of her chair, her legs crossed in front of her, and took a long, cumbersome drink of Whyren's Reserve.

When the Epicanthix set the highball down on the table to her left, she pressed a button on her commlink and paged her captain.

“What do you need, my lord?” the voice of Owen Serrus crackled from her belt.

Ronovi wrinkled her nose and took in the smell of old oak and congealed amber. “Send a transmission to the *Vigilant*. I have need of a pilot from their ranks.”

“Roger. Do you have someone in mind?”

“Yes. He owes me a favor.” The Dread Lord smiled grimly. “He’ll *always* owe me a favor.”

Ascendancy, Main Lounge

Lyra-3K-a system

An hour later

Zuser Whuloc, his hair a tousled coxcomb above his goggles, incessantly drummed his fingers on the sleek, transparisteel bar. A lukewarm cola in a once frosted glass lay abandoned in front of him, but he could not bring himself to drink the remaining carbonated froth. He was doing his best to overcome the jitters, and he knew that as soon as the one who had summoned him to the *Ascendancy* appeared, the shaking would only get worse.

If only this ship’s bar offered coin-crabs, he thought bitterly, watching a Subjugate clean glasses almost mechanically. Then I’d feel a little better. Or maybe they’d just nauseate me. Digestive tract, why hast thou forsaken me?

His cerebral ranting was interrupted by the arrival of the goliath. Sitting upright, Zuser could not help but stare, unblinking, as Ronovi sat on a stool right beside him, dressed in her black uniform. He said nothing as she pointed at the glass-scrubbing “asset,” extending two fingers to identify the amount of alcohol she wanted. In less than two minutes, a glass of whiskey was provided to her, and she sipped slowly on it, the golden brew disappearing like a hot stream between her lips.

I’d honestly be turned on if I weren’t so scared...and if she weren’t such a hom -

“You’re taking me to Karufr.”

The pilot blinked. He slowly pushed aside a tuft of angry hair, fingers quivering. “Beg pardon?”

“Did I stutter?” Ronovi asked, her breath reeking of Whyren’s. “You’re taking me to Karufr. Capital of the Kr’Tal system.”

“But...but that’s...”

“That’s what?”

Zuser twitched. “That’s the home system of Clan Taldryan.”

“Yeah? They’ve got Caelus now, too.”

“Neither of which are anywhere near here.”

“Nope. Your point?”

The man blinked again, then leaned forward as if to bestow upon Ronovi a great secret. “I don’t know if you noticed or anything,” he hissed, “but we’re kind of in the middle of a *war* here.”

He was met immediately with a sharp clap across the ear, and he shrank back in pain. Not only had he lost his hearing on his right side, but he was pretty sure that blood was now leaking profusely from his ruptured eardrum. Satisfied with her precise strike, Ronovi playfully swiveled on her stool.

“And I don’t know why you haven’t learned this about me yet,” she retorted, “but I couldn’t care less. TuQ’uan will be in charge when I’m gone. Admiral Ranin and Captain Serrus will back him. I need to take advantage of this silliness.”

“ ‘Silliness?’ Is that what you’re calling this whole thing?”

“Of course I am,” smirked the Dread Lord. “Another day, another stupid spat that the Dark Council drags us into. I understand getting off on constant conflict, but predictable much? So take me to your pretty ship, Whuloc - I’ve got a mission to undertake.”

Zuser couldn’t believe it. For one mistake he had made over six years ago, he was being yanked around the galaxy on a chain - *again*. Was his indirect destruction of Ronovi’s booze stash really worth the constant Herculean trials? Still, it was either this or being pummeled into the consistency of mashed potatoes, so he wasn’t willing to fight back. Instead, he picked up his drink and choked back the now room temperature cola, coughing as the last of the bubbles tickled his throat. Then, he observed Ronovi tossing back her whiskey, standing up and cracking the knuckles on her right hand.

“Lead the way to the hangar, my boy,” she sneered, and all Zuser could do was shrug and walk forward.

Wrath, Bridge
Lyra-3K-a system
Twenty minutes later

“What do you mean, Ronovi’s abandoning her post?” TuQ’uan Varick growled through his mask, shaking beneath his hat. The hologram of Cyvvaria Ranin shuddered, but she remained nonchalant.

“She claims the assignment she’s taking on is of uttermost importance.”

“Like kriff it is! We’re about to siege the Thuvis shipyards!”

“Looks like you’re in charge then, Wrath,” Ranin replied. “Your orders?”

TuQ’uan fell silent. He knew that Ronovi was reckless and unpredictable, but this was coming out of left field for him. He rubbed his temples and groaned loudly.

“We move as planned,” he declared. “We can survive without the juggernaut for a bit.”

Taldrya Private Room
Ziggurat, Taldryan Great Hall
Karufr
Kr’Tal System
37 ABY

He was hunched over the computer screen, fingers dancing across keypads and data pads. As the light glared in his eyes, he was suddenly reminded of how thirsty he was. Reaching to his left, he snagged a half-full carafe of Corellian wine, sipping from it casually as the cyber world whirled around him in an intoxicating tornado of data and information.

The Adept had always been antisocial. Now that he was officially retired from Taldryan proceedings, that sense of hermitage had only grown.

His private room in the Great Hall was not one of luxury, but of necessity - a bed, a kitchen, a bathroom, a great view of the outside. He had never exactly desired more. His stint as Master of the Holocrons had exposed him enough to temples, dark and dank chambers, and vaults; now he was just glad to have sunshine, warmth, and a good meal. He knew that everyone and their mother had boarded their ships and flown to some system or other to fight some Force haters. What was the place called again? Lila? Lyrica? Corneria? He did like swords.

He was halfway through his latest battleplan experiment (not for Taldryan, but just for fun - a little simulation to stimulate the cortex, he determined) when he felt a stinging sensation pulsing around his forehead. Pausing, the man stood up, blinking rapidly, trying to deduce the source of the pain. He was perceptive; in his immediate environment, he was a pro observer, and nothing could get past him. But this? This felt different, like a premonition. He couldn't figure out the specifics. But he began to feel a sense of calm.

Someone's coming for me, aren't they?

He was used to being hated. Used to being attacked. He remembered, all too well, a ridiculous confrontation he had had in the Shadow Academy a while back. Some young, recalcitrant Headmaster with too big of an ego - and too much of a hard-on for holocrons. Metaphorically speaking, of course; she could never spring a literal boner. Still, that memory stuck out to him, as if a weed were growing in the fresh grass of his imagination. He tied the blades together, formed a picture, and smiled.

Well, then, he thought. If so, then let her come. Heh...come.

He returned to his console, clicking away, and submerged himself in his own holo-galaxy again. Beside his bed, the hilt of his lightsaber was already starting to grow warm.

Ghtroc 720 Light Freighter *Wraith* Hyperspace

Ronovi and Zuser sat in the cockpit of the man's personal freighter in silence. The stars turned into silver taffy in the viewing portal, and the overhead lights hummed as if practicing a sacred hymn. Ronovi whistled a bit to fracture the endless quiet, while Zuser reached into the pocket of his coat and produced a chance cube. He let it slip through his fingers in a sleight of hand, the object disappearing and reappearing as if in and out of the void. And as he did this, he let out a colossal belch, most likely due to the cola he had imbibed.

"Nice," Ronovi abruptly opined.

Zuser seemed startled by Ronovi's comment, then grinned. "Thanks," he replied. "I've been practicing." It wasn't entirely clear if he was referring to the sleight of hand or the very loud burp.

Toward the back of the freighter, a KX-series droid was lethargically lifting and shuffling crates and boxes. Ronovi was ready to ask what they contained, but then she remembered she didn't care. Instead, she stared out the viewing portal, remembering the madness that sometimes sunk in for some weary travelers who looked at hyperspace for too long.

“So.” The word slipped out of Zuser’s mouth slowly, like molasses. “Why do you want to go to Karufr, anyway?”

At first, Ronovi said nothing. She contemplated whether it was worth telling the guy at all. Zuser was known for being...spastic at best and a liability at worst. She was all too aware of his stunts in his ship, nearly colliding with the Pinnacle every time he went for a night ride on Aliso. Even when she looked at him, she was reminded of a holocomic she had read, in which some goofy “ace” always got into ridiculous shenanigans with the Empire. Not the best read - and the art had been horribly done.

Still, he *could* be useful, if only as a meat shield when the time for a duel came. So Ronovi decided to humor him. She tore her gaze away from the cosmos, settled her organic eye on the pilot, and exhaled.

“You ever get fired from a dream job, my man?”

Zuser scratched at the scar that ran horizontally across his right cheek. “Can’t say I have,” he confessed. “Though I haven’t exactly been hired a lot, either. Why do you ask?”

“You know I was Headmaster of the Shadow Academy,” Ronovi said. “A damn good gig, if I say so myself. Training the next great Dark Jedi. Protecting the place against a stupid virus. Sure, I nearly blew up the damn school, but I had good intentions, didn’t I? But the road to...well, anyway. It all fell apart when I was confronted by one man. A man who’s so plain-looking that you couldn’t pick him out of a crowd if you tried. But geez, was he good at Sokan...”

“O...kay...?”

“I almost had him, though,” snarled the Epicanthix. “He couldn’t keep me down for long. But then, the Lion...the damn *Lion*...he had to intervene. With his Grand Master status and his authority and his beautiful, luscious long locks...”

“Are you talking about Muz Ashen?”

Ronovi now glared at Zuser. “No,” she sarcastically answered. “I’m talking about Mav. Yes, I’m talking about Muz. Not that I can take *him* on - he’d deep fry me with a snap of his fingers. But the artist formerly known as the ‘Keeper of the Holocrons?’ Now him...*him* I could beat. With a little luck, of course...”

“Who’s this *him*?” Zuser demanded. “Why are you being so cryptic? For poetic license?!”

He was clapped on the opposite ear than last time for his insolence. As he slumped forward and thanked the stars for setting his ship to autopilot, he could just barely hear the next thing Ronovi said.

"*You* are my pilot, Whuloc," Ronovi snapped. "*You* are my drudge. *You* don't always get the *privilege* of knowing everything. So do what you do best, steer this ship, and shut your trap. Got it?"

Through the throbbing pain radiating from his skull, Zuser didn't even dare challenge Ronovi or point out that she had answered his questions earlier without hesitation or dealing him physical harm. He simply decided that she was going through some mood swings - all women were prone to that, right? - and sent a glance at Skull, the droid that was now audibly sighing over the sad state of the cargo.

"Just as well," Skull whined. "Not even fit enough to organize boxes. What good am I, anyway?"

Zuser said nothing to that. He focused on the coordinates and saw how close they were already getting to the Kr'Tal system. Now, as he opened up communications to the nearest Taldryan space station, it was time to gain access to the clan's domain.

Citadel Alpha
Cardan-class space station
Kr'Tal System

Braxis Codi was in need of a drink and a nap.

He had stayed up for the past eighteen hours, reviewing reports from the main Taldryan fleets, as well as checking in with the home fleet every fifteen minutes. So far, no issues - shocker. He stood up from his chair and paced a bit, eyeing his subordinates as they manned various consoles in the space station's control center.

The commander of Citadel Alpha knew it was far past his bedtime, and he could feel the exhaustion creep into his bones and make itself at home there. But orders were orders. With the near entirety of Taldryan's forces gone to the Lyra system to take on the Collective, it was up to the Rattataki to ensure that their home system - as well as the recently claimed Caelus - was safe. And he had done well so far.

As his eyelids grew as heavy as stones, Braxis decided that a strong cup of caf was in order. He walked to the caf dispenser and waited for the brew to drip down into a plain steel cup. As he listened to the raindrop-like trickle, he was suddenly very aware of a crackling voice emerging from the commlink hooked to his utility belt.

"Commander Codi - we have an unidentified ship requesting access to Kr'Tal space. Insignia looks like it belongs to Clan Plagueis."

The man's pale, tattooed skin grew cold. This was exactly what he was worried would happen. Forgetting about his drink, he hurried back over to his command deck, pressing a few keys until he was in direct correspondence with the vessel. "This is Commander Braxis. State your ship number and your purpose for entering Kr'Tal airspace."

He was more than surprised to hear a sharp, yet lilting, female voice emerge, as a fuzzy image of a woman sprung from the holopad installed on his console. "Yes, this is Ronovi Tavisæn, Dread Lord of Clan Plagueis. I have business with one Benevolent Whiner Taldrya."

Braxis blinked; he had certainly not expected this. "Mr. Whiner has not been an official element of Taldryan for years," he explained. "Has Consul Aslar confirmed an appointment?"

There was a chuckle, then: "I don't need an appointment."

All at once, the commander felt light-headed. Despite his experiences as a warrior, gladiator, and aggressor, he was not at all prepared for even the most basic of these tricks.

"You don't need an appointment," he heard himself robotically repeating.

"You will grant me access to Karufr."

"I will grant you access to Karufr."

Another chortle. "And you will leave me alone from here on out."

"I will leave you alone from here on out."

Behind him, the dripping of caf grew louder and louder. And he was now very, very sleepy.

Ghtroc 720 Light Freighter *Wraith* Kr'Tal Airspace

Zuser eyed Ronovi warily as he witnessed her roughshod mind trick, a small rivulet of sweat maneuvering its way from her eyebrow down the prominent scar dancing along her jawline. After her physical and mental exertion, she finally lowered her outstretched hand, which she had used to wave at the small hologram of the station commander that had appeared on the ship's console, wiggling her sore fingers and trying to get blood flowing back into them.

"You can do that?" he asked.

“Barely,” Ronovi muttered, gathering her breath. “And only with non-Force users. I’ve always been a bit rudimentary with my Force usage. ‘Cept the lightning - I love to zap some bastards.”

“Riiiiight,” muttered Zuser, quietly contemplating ejecting himself out of the airlock of his own ship.

The *Wraith* cruised past the Citadel Alpha station with ease, watching as all manner of home fleet ships withdrew to allow them to pass. Tapping a few keys on his console, Zuser set the coordinates to Karufr. He then leaned back and sighed loudly, which was only rivaled by Skull’s sad exhalations behind him.

“So, what’s the deal?” he asked Ronovi. “You gonna kill this Benevolent guy all by yourself?”

“What made you think - ”

“I may be a bit of a goof, Ronovi,” Zuser interrupted, “but I’m not entirely an idiot. Benevolent’s the dude who cost you your position. And now, while everyone’s off handling the Collective and the Principal...”

“Principate.”

“Whatever. My point is, you’re gonna swoop in and try to off this guy.”

There was a moment of tense silence; then, a curt click of Ronovi’s tongue. She smiled and folded her arms across her chest. “I suppose ‘try to’ is the operative term here. Also, nice way to put it, Mister Classy Vernacular.”

“Is it really worth it to piss off an entire clan by killing one of their own?”

“Meh. Who cares?” Ronovi shrugged. “I think Plagueis can handle the Old Folks’ Home.”

“And what if you can’t kill him?” demanded Zuser. “What if he kills you first?”

“...That is, in fact, a very strong possibility.”

“Mmhmm.”

“That’s why you’re coming with me as back-up.”

Zuser felt his eyebrows practically skyrocket off his forehead. Then he heard a low, sad chuckle.

“Sounds about right,” mumbled Skull. “Enjoy your time now, master, before things get worse.”

Arcanum Greenhouse
Taldryan Great Hall
Karufr
Kr'Tal System
Two hours later

The heat of the greenhouse swelled around him, fidgeting flora budding and leaves bristling as if stirred by a spirit-given breeze. A waterfall sobbed behind him, slopping its tears down carefully arranged stones and bushes, shining with the pristine, pink-aquamarine gleam of sadness. In the middle of the circle, he sat not cross-legged, but with his legs splayed out in front of him, stretching his calves and lolling his head from side to side to reduce the kinks in his neck.

Benevolent was not accustomed to meditating. And in all honesty, he wasn't going to start now.

It was very quiet in the Arcanum. Without the rest of the Taldrya around, it was like he had the whole domain to himself. The Great Hall was nearly a hollowed out mouth without teeth now - no echoes of voices, no clicking of boot steps. No signs of life anywhere. This, of course, made the Adept acutely aware of everything, his five senses amplified to the nth degree. His sleuthing skills, as a result, were on point.

Standing up slowly, Benevolent stretched his arms, feeling each hair bristle before they were weighed down by the humidity around him. His tongue moved restlessly in his mouth, scraping against his molars. This was a far cry from his computer time, and now he was aching for some self-imposed isolation again in his room. Being in the natural elements - well, as natural as they could be in this space - felt odd to him. He shrugged off the prickling sensation running across his forehead again, humming lyrics that eased the pins and needles.

*"From the dusty mesa, her looming shadow grows,
hidden in the branches of the poison creosote...
She twines her spines up slowly towards the boiling sun,
and when I touched her skin, my fingers ran with blood..."*

He began to walk away from the waterfall, ignoring its gushing snuffles and its tedious liquid misery. He carried his saber with him, as well as his Bryar pistol. While the greenhouse was too warm for his coat, he wore his waistcoat and slacks and hat, which was squashed down against his unkempt brown hair. He reached out toward some vine or ivy that he couldn't identify without a botany text. It tingled against his bare fingers. The smell of sap and sugar filled his nostrils.

*"In the hushing dusk, under a swollen silver moon.
I came walking with the wind to watch the cactus bloom.
and strange hunger haunted me, the looming shadows danced."*

I fell down to the thorny brush and felt the trembling hands..."

Suddenly, he wasn't alone.

Benevolent whipped his head to the left, cutting his singing short. The bent and twisted notes faded, though the music in his head never subsided. He thought of guitars, stand-up bass, various drums and other miscellaneous percussion. The bellowing of the horns in the background. He was a wild west private eye, and he wasn't going to let someone sneak on him.

He took a few soft, steps to the right, the heat of the greenhouse pressing into his shoulders. His tunic was damp, and abruptly, so were his spirits. Although he sensed someone was nearby, he never felt more alone. That usually never bothered him, but now...now was different.

*"When the last light warms the rocks and the rattlesnakes unfold
Mountain cats will come to drag away your bones..."*

He was nearly out of the greenhouse now, hoping for colder air. A breeze, an icy drink, a frosty pillow. He was tired. Very tired. And still, he sang.

*"And rise with me forever, across the silent sand,
and the stars will be your eyes, and the wind - "*

He was cut off by a whistle - almost in tune with him, almost harmonious. Benevolent turned around quickly, his Bryar pistol yanked from his holster. He shot into the air, made contact, heard a grunt. The smoke rose in a feathery plume from the barrel. It would take time for the firearm to recharge.

He found himself face to face with a very young man - average height, though heavily built - a blaster bolt singed across his exposed arm. In the other, he held a DL-44 blaster, cocked and aimed at Benevolent, though not at his head.

"Ow," the man grunted. "That hurt."

Then he fired.

Benevolent wasn't sure how it happened, but he thought had the guy hit him, and smartly. He felt the fire lance through his right shoulder, piercing the sinews within and disabling his dominant arm. But wait. This wasn't right. If he had been shot, it wouldn't feel like this. And come to think of it, it appeared he had been struck from behind...

His incredible perception skills had failed him, in a simple moment of distraction. And in the next moment, he felt the stickiness of his own blood outside his body.

A vibroblade had entered gracefully into the left side of his neck, puncturing it just above the jugular vein. Shakes and shivers from the weapon's jagged edge only served to stimulate the flow of plasma from the new hole in his flesh. Benevolent gurgled and choked, and he pitched forward, his knees colliding with the flat, lush ground beneath. He saw stars in front of him, and not the kind he could view from his window. He wanted to grab his lightsaber, but his right arm refused to move.

The sound of a hiss signified a deactivated lightsaber; *so that's what hit me in the shoulder*. And now Benevolent Whiner was slowly bleeding out, raising his head to catch a glimpse of a blue eyepatch.

"Well, hello, *neighbor*," he managed to utter through a mouthful of blood. "Did you bring another cup of sugar?"

The response was a sharp kick to the solar plexus, a black boot leaving scuffs across his body. Then, a laugh. Benevolent tried hard to heal himself, but the pain coming from all angles made it difficult. He didn't have enough time, nor enough air.

"You remember me," remarked his assassin.

"A-always good for a laugh, T-Tavisaen," Benevolent pushed out. "H-how are things?"

"Good. Very good," Ronovi intoned. "Now that I've finally taken care of you."

Taldryan's not going to like this, thought Benevolent with a wavering smile. *Not at all*.

He waited until his vision went gray, all color drained from the world around him. He had a few more fleeting images to hold on to. He saw the Epicanthix standing over him, vibroknife bloodied and already seeming to rust from red to brown. He saw her sidekick looking away, wiping sweat off his brow and holstering his pistol. All melting away in an instant...dissolving in an instant.

Huh. I don't feel so good.

Then he remembered the line from the song he hadn't been able to finish:

And rise with me forever across the silent sand...

And the stars will be your eyes...and the wind will be my hands...

Carry me away, o' great wind, Benevolent laughed to himself, and then, all at once, he was free.

Standing over the Adept's body, Ronovi's lips stretched into a painful, all-teeth bearing smile.

“About damn time.”

Wrath, Bridge
Lyra-3k-a system
Three hours later

The atmosphere on the *Wrath* was tense. TuQ’uan had not yet heard back from Ronovi, and diplomatic discussions with the Principate were not going well. If the Dread Lord had stuck around, he would have been able to go to the shipyards to help with negotiations. But he was stuck here, on a ship that he was barely familiar with.

“Any word from the infiltration teams?” he asked his XO.

“Negative.”

The Kel Dor cursed under his breath. He walked to the nearest viewing portal on the bridge and surveyed the scene outside. This was going to get messy. If the diplomatic talks fell through, they wouldn’t just be attacking the Collective; they’d be taking on the Principate as well. And the *Wrath* didn’t want that.

His stream-of-conscious panic was interrupted. “Sir? Sir, we’ve received a transmission request.”

“From whom? The 5th fleet?”

“No, sir.” His XO even sounded confused. “Rian Aslar.”

Rian Aslar? The Consul of Taldryan? What does he want?

Not vocalizing his perplexion, TuQ’uan instead nodded, accepting Aslar’s request. In the next moment, a furiously jittery hologram popped up in front of him. The Mirialan Consul looked stony, yet resolved, his yellow lips drawn into a thin line, his black tattoos somehow showing up sharply through the glitchy technology.

“TuQ’uan Varick,” he announced. “Taldryan has a bone to pick with your clan.”

The Kel Dor did not even hesitate. He ran a finger across the wide brim of his hat, examined his skin for dust, and sighed.

“What did Ronovi do now?”

“Intuitive. Very intuitive for a non-Force user like yourself,” commented Rian. “The better question is, in the midst of this already existing chaos...what will *you* do now?”

The tension was palpable. Somehow, as his anxiety took hold of him, TuQ’uan thought he could taste clotted blood in his mouth.

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