

Gathering Evidence

Lucine Vasano (#14877)

Objective 2

Lucine Snapshot: <https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/members/14877/snapshots/1825/3428>

Tabriss Snapshot: <https://www.darkjedibrotherhood.com/members/14877/snapshots/1826/3429>

Lyra Colony: Eorilia's Moon
Lyra-3K-a System
37 ABY

Amara Cirrus picked her way carefully across the central plaza of the colony, scanning the devastation with narrowed blue eyes. Most of the towers lay in ruins, and several buildings too. Twisted corpses littered the streets, their faces almost uniformly set into masks of pain and confusion. In all likelihood, they had not known what hit them.

In that, Amara felt like she had a certain kinship with the fallen. The attack had come without warning, striking with such quickness and cruelty that it had taken the defense forces completely by surprise.

She smiled grimly as her eyes fell upon the twisted wreckage of one of the enemy TIE fighters. At least they had fought back and managed to bring one of the enemy fighters down before the rest had fled.

She started toward it, but a smaller object nearby caught her attention. A bloodied form of a woman lay in the street, her face obscured by a veil of thick black hair. She clutched a smaller form to her chest even in death: the pale, still form of a girl, about ten years old. A charred doll lay a few feet away from the child's lifeless hand.

Amara gritted her teeth against the rage that boiled up suddenly within her. The attack had come at the same time that the colony's school had let out. No doubt it had been planned with that detail in mind, to maximize destruction and loss of life. Who knew how many other small bodies they would find a result?

"A cowardly attack," she hissed as she knelt to pick up the doll.

"That it is, ma'am," he assistant replied. Jonas's voice was tight as he too fought to restrain his emotions. "We will make the Brotherhood pay."

Amara remained silent as she studied the girl's face closely. The child's eyes were closed. Were it not for the splinter of metal that pieced mother and child alike, she could have been sleeping.

Carefully, she placed the remnants of the doll in the girl's limp outstretched hand, before looking up at her assistant. "The Triumvirate will not move against the Brotherhood without evidence. I want all debris from that TIE fighter logged and sent to the main office. Also, I want complete dossiers compiled of all of the dead and wounded. We will make the Brotherhood pay in blood for every man, woman and child lost here today."

The Viper's Nest

Orbit over Eorilia's Moon
Lyra-3K-a System
37 ABY

Lucine reclined in her chair, gazing at the holographic representations of the other Summit members as Rhy lance gave his report. The Chiss's voice was dispassionate as he relayed the most recent turn of events. "At this point, three locations have been attacked. A salvage repair station and a colony were attacked directly by TIE fighters."

As the Proconsul spoke, images appeared on the screen of Lucine's datapad. The first set featured the repair station, showing unmistakable signs of heavy laser cannon fire. Many of its buildings lay in ruins, and fires could be seen burning throughout the images. The second set of visuals could only be the colony. The devastation was immediately visible in the crumbling buildings and destroyed defensive towers. Vague, huddled shapes could be seen littering the streets.

Upon seeing them, the ghostly image of Tali Sroka sat up a little straighter. Lucine noted the way the Twi'lek's eyes glittered with intense fire. I suppose it is better in insurmountable grief, Lucine thought to herself as she turned her attention back to Rhy lance's presentation.

"The third location was an explosion at a kyber mine, where explosions were followed shortly by the arrival of Collective forces to offer 'assistance'," the Chiss finished. He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

Kordath made an irritated whistle through his nose. "So the bastards are try'na frame us for the attacks."

"That would appear to be the case. Each of the attacks bear a common theme: that they were instigated by the Brotherhood. The attacking ships all carried Brotherhood signal codes and were making statements such as 'For the Brotherhood' via the comms," Rhy lance replied.

"Well, why don't we just tell them we didn't do it?" Aldaric suggested, his holographic image shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"They will be unlikely to listen, darling," Lucine said. "The investigation into the attacks is being led by a woman by the name of Amara Cirrus. She is good at her job, but rather dogmatic in her approach. The Dajorra Intelligence Agency has managed to acquire her investigative records, and it appears that she is working on the assumption that we did instigate the attack. She is building a case that will surely result in war against the Brotherhood." She tapped on the interface of her datapad, transmitting a series of files. "Here are the pertinent files, for your review."

“Another enemy in our frakkin backyard,” Satsi grumbled, not even bothering to look at the files. She tensed in her chair, like a loth cat preparing to pounce.

“It is less than ideal,” Rhy lance agreed as he glanced through the files. “This is a significant amount of evidence, but nothing conclusively proves that the Brotherhood was responsible. It appears their only real evidence is what was transmitted on the comms and the ship signatures.”

“Which can be forged,” Kordath said grimly. “So, fine, we need’ta get proof we didn’t do it.”

Silence fell over the Summit as they considered what evidence they could produce. The only one who did not appear deep in thought was Rhy lance, who continued to sort through the investigative files. After a few minutes, he paused and raised an eyebrow. “Some of the pieces of TIE fighter debris appear to bear similar markings. What could they possibly be?”

Lucine pulled up the catalog of debris. Sure enough, there appeared to be some sort of sigil stamped into the metal. “Perhaps it is a manufacturer mark?”

“Maybe,” Kordath allowed. “Might be worth lookin’ inta.”

“As good fortune would have it, I have a contact who works in the manufacturing business on Elizabeth-II,” Lucine supplied. “I will reach out to him and see if he can give me anything.”

“Yeah, do that,” the Shadow Lord said with a sigh. “Not like we got anything else ta go on.”

The Summit meeting ended a few minutes later. As the holographic representations of the Summit members flickered out one by one, Lucine retrieved her contact list and began to sort through it.

At last, she found the name she was looking for. Elias Thorpe had once been a small-time grifter and confidence man who had wanted to hit it big. He had approached Lucine looking for opportunities about a year ago, and she had managed to use a considerable amount of her resources to place him in a position within Titan Manufacturing Incorporated, a subsidiary of Capital Enterprises. Now she was very glad that she had taken the time to do so.

She pressed the button to initiate the call to Elias. The holoprojector immediately filled with static and a loud hissing noise, causing Lucine to frown in confusion. Elias, it seemed, could no longer be reached through that means.

“I shall have to take the more pedestrian route. How irritating,” she said with a sigh. It only took a quick holonet search to find the contact information to Titan Manufacturing Incorporated. After reaching the operator and requesting her contacts office, the screen was filled with the face of an elderly Rodian female wearing a shade of garish pink lipstick.

“You’ve reached the office of Mr. Elias Thorpe,” she croaked in a voice that could only be described as overly self-important.

Lucine fought the urge to grind her teeth in irritation at being forced to deal with the gatekeeper. “Yes, I wish to speak with Mr. Thorpe.”

“And what is this concerning?” The Rodian replied in a disinterested voice.

“A matter of import,” the Sith replied. When the secretary only stared at her, she added, “Which also has a significant number of time constraints. Connect me now, please.” Though she seethed inwardly, she kept her voice pleasant.

The Rodian visibly bristled at being told what to do. “Mr. Thorpe is in a meeting. In fact, his whole day is packed with meetings. If you wish, I can pencil you in for a conference call. His first availability will be sometime next week.”

“Unacceptable,” Lucine snapped. “I will leave a message. Tell him to contact Ariadne Longrew as soon as possible.” Ariadne Longrew was the alias she used while interacting with her contacts on within the Collective.

The Rodian snorted rudely and made no effort to write the name down. “I’ll tell him. But as I said, his schedule is—” A male voice in the background said something inaudible, and the Rodian turned her head to look at the speaker. When she looked back at Lucine, her expression was filled with disapproval. “One moment, please. I am patching you through.”

“Thank you,” the redhead replied, her voice edged with ice. The screen went blank. When it flickered back on, it was Elias’s face that she saw. He sat in a massive bantha leather desk chair in what appeared to be a well-appointed office. His short brown hair was starting to go gray in the temples but was cut in a style that was favored by most corporate executives. His grey eyes were narrowed slightly, and his thin lips were set in a narrow line.

“Ms. Longrew! This is a pleasant surprise!” he said in a clipped tone, managing a weak smile. Still, the way he set with his back erect and his hands clasped tightly in front of him made his nervousness clear.

“I am thrilled that you think so, darling,” Lucine replied with a warmth in her voice that she did not feel. Still, his apparent nervousness was a welcome sight. It meant that he would be much more likely to comply with her request. “It appears that you are moving up in the world.”

Elias gave another weak smile. “Business has been booming,” he allowed. “What can I do for you?”

“Is this a secure line?”

The man’s weak smile faded and he glanced around his office nervously. “Yeah, yeah it is. We’re on my office line.”

“Oh, that is excellent to hear.” Lucine flipped through the interface of her datapad and found the images that bore the mysterious emblem. The pictures had been captured at a close-up angle, which would deny Elias any context in what the markings had been stamped on. “I am sending you a few images. Tell me, do you recognize the markings?”

She heard a chime as the message was received, and Elias’s eyes flicked down to his datapad to inspect them. “Well, yes. These are the manufacturing marks my company uses.” He grimaced. “The new CEO is aggressive about branding. He insists that the logo be stamped on everything that we make.”

“Your company specializes in fighter ship component production, does it not? Who is your primary client?” Lucine asked.

A wary look crossed the blue-tinged hologram of Elias’s face. “I think you already know the answer to that,” he replied slowly.

“I do, I simply needed the confirmation. So, your company supplies ships and components for the Collective. Oh, that is excellent,” Lucine smiled, pleased at how neatly this was coming together. “Well then, darling, it is time for you to pay back that little favor you owe me.”

“Th-the favor?” Elias’s anxiety was palpable, even across the distance of space. “What do you want?”

“I want verifiable evidence that ties this manufacturer’s mark and your company to the Collective. You are in a position to get that information to me, are you not?”

“Uh... yes. Yes, I suppose I am,” the man said slowly. “It won’t be easy. I’ll need time to get it.”

Lucine felt her smile fade a bit. “Time is a commodity that is in short supply. How much of it do you need?”

“Well, I can’t really say. It might take a couple of weeks,” Elias responded vaguely.

The Sith paused, studying the man’s hologram closely. His evasive answer combined with the nervous twisting of his hands spoke volumes. “I cannot give you a few weeks. I need this information as soon as possible. I suggest that you make it a priority.”

“Sure, of course I will,” Elias said, though he did not meet her eyes as he did so. It only increased her nagging feeling that he had no intention of making good on his word.

“I do hope you are not planning on going back on your end of the bargain,” she pressed. “Things tend to end poorly for those who do.”

“No no, I get it. I’ll get you something.”

“See that you do,” Lucine said coolly. She ended the call abruptly, before leaning back in her chair to gaze thoughtfully at the now blank screen. “And for your sake, it had best be sufficient.”

True to his word, the files arrived within a few hours. They contained advertising material featuring Titan Manufacturing’s latest line of starfighter components. Lucine’s eyes narrowed as she gazed at what Elias had sent her and gave a low hiss under her breath. “This is not what I asked for,” she murmured.

But at least her suspicions were confirmed: Elias was trying to back out of their deal. The Sith took a deep breath and quieted her growing anger. “How irritating. It appears I shall have to take a more direct approach,” she said out loud. She then glanced up at the slender Chiss who stood nearby, preparing her afternoon tea. “Tabriss, darling? Be a dear and pack an overnight bag. It appears I shall have to pay a visit to Elias to secure my pound of flesh.”

Tabriss raised his eyebrows as he handed the cup of tea to her. “Shall I inform the Shadow Scion that you will be departing the theatre?”

Lucine paused, considering his words as she inhaled the fragrant steam that wafted lazily up from the cup. Her butler made a good point. As Quaestor of Qel-Droma, her presence at the battlefield was all but required. In her level of leadership, she did not have the luxury to simply leave. She would need permission from someone higher up on the food chain. “Hmm, you make a good point,” she murmured. “No, I shall contact him directly. See to my luggage and make the necessary preparations to depart.”

It took significantly less effort to get into contact with Rhyllance. Given their relationship and positions in Arconan leadership, they frequently conferred several times a day. She considered it one of her more pleasant responsibilities. When the Chiss’s holographic form appeared, she offered him a rare, genuine smile. “Rhyllance, darling! Please, forgive the interruption. I do hope I am not distracting you from anything important.”

“I do not consider you to be a distraction,” the Proconsul replied, his usually icy voice touched with warmth.

Knowing that their communications were being monitored, they were not able to talk freely. Instead, they kept their conversation professional. They discussed the Summit meeting that had

occurred this morning and their impressions of what the Collective's goals could be. At last, Lucine broached the subject at hand. "Well, I do have a good lead on evidence that could prove that these were false flag attacks. But I am afraid it is going to require me to take a small field trip."

"A field trip where?" Rhyllance asked.

"To Elizabeth-II."

"Elizabeth-II," the Chiss repeated doubtfully. "What in the world could you possibly need from there?"

"That is where my contact is based. He has confirmed that the marks are in fact manufacturer marks, and he is in the position to give me the evidence we need. But," she made a small moue of disgust. "It seems he is going to need some... direct convincing to give me what I want." Her tone made it clear that her planned methods were going to be anything other than pleasant.

Silence stretched over them as Rhyllance studied her closely. His lips were pressed into a thin line, a clear sign of his displeasure at her request. "Impossible. We cannot spare the soldiers to escort you."

"That is just as well, darling. A squad of soldiers is likely to be noticed. Tabriss and I will be able to slip in and out much more easily if we were not encumbered by a sizeable group of armed soldiers."

"Have you forgotten that Elizabeth-II is deep in the heart of Collective Territory? The Collective, who makes it their primary business to kill Force Users on sight unless they decide to experiment on them first? And that you are, in fact, a Force User?" Rhyllance spoke slowly, as if he was interacting with a complete idiot. It was a tone that he rarely took with her, and made his discomfort with her request even more apparent.

"I have not forgotten any of those things, Rhyllance," Lucine replied in a reassuring tone. "My cover within the Collective Territories is already well established. Indeed, I have already used it with no trouble at all. Besides, why would the Collective have any reason to suspect that a single lone Force User is trying to infiltrate them? They are more likely to expect to find us in direct conflict with them here, or to send an armed response directly to their territories."

Rhyllance tilted his head as he gave her a doubtful look. Still, Lucine pressed on. "It is the best chance I can see to obtain definitive evidence that the Brotherhood is not responsible for the attacks on the Severian Principate."

The Chiss sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "This is an extremely foolhardy proposition."

Lucine smiled inwardly. She almost had him. "I do not like it either. However, it is just a quick trip. I will be spending, at most, a few hours within their territory. It will be little more than a milk run. If I hurry, I might be able to be back in time for our dinner appointment."

"Well, it sounds as if you are determined on this course of action," Rhyllance said as he smirked at the mention of their date. "Very well, you may go. But I cannot stress enough that you use the utmost caution. No waving your lightsaber around, or any other flashy heroics. You are too valuable an asset to lose. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly!" Lucine said as she gave him a warm smile.

"Good." The Chiss fixed her with one last glare to reinforce how serious he was about the subject. But, after a moment, his expression softened almost imperceptibly. "Come back safe."

"That is my every intention," the Sith murmured, before ending the call. She smiled softly as she considered his words, his body language, and what had gone unsaid between them. But her reverie was soon broken with the arrival of Tabriss, who cleared his throat quietly to inform her of his presence.

"Is all in readiness, then?" she asked.

"Indeed, my lady. We can depart forthwith," the butler replied.

"Excellent. In that case, calculate a hyperjump course to Elizabeth-II, and let us proceed with the jump as soon as it is calculated. Let us get this over with."

"As you wish, my lady," Tabriss replied with a small bow.

Argos City
Elizabeth-II
Cor'neria System
1159 Local Time

As predicted, navigating through Collective space was relatively uneventful. The false ident tags and lack of obvious weaponry on The Viper's Nest meant that the ships that regularly patrolled the system quickly dismissed them as any sort of threat.

As Tabriss navigated their ship for a landing at one of the ports outside of Argos City, Lucine took the time to make her preparations. She began by calling upon one of the more proficient DIA slicers to discover the specifics of Elias's schedule. As it turned out, he was scheduled to

attend a gala in a few hours, to celebrate Titan Manufacturing's record 2nd quarter profits. It was a simple matter to get the slicer to add the name of her cover to the guest list.

With her plans in place, Lucine went to the closet to select her attire for the evening. She decided to go with basic black: a sleeveless black silk dress that hugged her curves, accented with a pattern of Corelian diamonds sewn into intricate patterns along the hem, waist, and chest. It was slit on the right side, which had the dual benefits of increased mobility and accentuating her legs. For her accessories, she chose an expensive array of diamonds and emeralds. Of course, the most important accessories were the ones that were carefully hidden: the lightsaber in the holder at the small of her back.

Of course, she had little doubt that whatever passed for intelligence within the Collective were already aware of all ranking members of the Brotherhood. Her red hair was a dead giveaway. She found the picture she had used as a reference when creating Ariadne's identity and stared at herself critically in the mirror. She drew upon the Force and used it to weave a careful illusion on herself. As she watched, her wavy red hair shifted into a glossy brown, and her skin darkened to an olive hue. Her full lips became thinner, shaped in a cupid's bow. Her large green eyes took on a more almond appearance but maintained their brilliant emerald color. Pure vanity, she thought to herself, but my eyes are my best feature.

She studied her reflection critically for a long moment before deciding she was satisfied with the results. Her appearance was identical to the image on her identity card. It would be enough to get past security so that she could have her little talk with Elias. At the thought of the man, she made a moue of distaste at his perfidy.

She was in the process of trying to stuff her Wester-34, a small communicator and a few pouches of blinding dust into a tasteful black handbag when the ship set down with a small shudder. A few minutes later, Tabriss appeared in the doorway.

"A perfect landing as always, darling," she said as she gave him a small nod.

"I thank you, my lady," Tabriss replied formally. "Will you require an escort to the gala?"

"Not directly, no," Lucine said. "Unfortunately, you are far too noticeable." With his deep blue skin and gently glowing red eyes, Tabriss would attract far too much attention. It was such a shame that there were not more Chiss out and about within the galaxy.

Tabriss inclined his head in acknowledgment as he took a few steps forward and took the handbag from her hands. With a few quick movements, he packed the items into the bag so that everything fit, before handing it back to her.

"Instead, I want you to follow from a discreet distance, and be careful to stay out of sight. I may have to take a less than conventional exit from the building, and may need you to cover my

exit," she continued as she memorized the locations of the contents of her handbag, in case she had to repack it in a hurry.

"As you wish, my lady," Tabriss said in a deferential tone. He glanced at the chrono that hung on a chain from his waistcoat. "It appears we have some time before the gala begins. Will you be requiring tea?"

"An excellent idea!" the Sith said. "While the water is heating, I will be memorizing the building layout and guest list." When the Chiss raised his eyebrows at her mention of the guest list, she offered him a mischievous smile. "You never know, darling. I might be able to see to some personal business while I am looking for dear Elias. I would just as soon be prepared."

Titan Manufacturing Incorporated: Main Office

Elizabeth-II

Cor'neria System

1300 Local Time

Lucine arrived at the office of Titan Manufacturing an hour later. The company was located on a large stretch of land on the northern side of the city. A single large transparisteel building served as its corporate headquarters, where the gala itself would be held. It was surrounded by several squat tan buildings that had a utilitarian look about them. No doubt that is where the starfighter parts are manufactured, Lucine thought to herself as her hired transport drew nearer.

As the transport glided to rest on the curved roadway in front of the office, Lucine studied the security goons that stood just inside the massive transparisteel and durasteel doors. They looked like typical Technocratic guild goons, all muscle and unnecessary cybernetic additions. None had any augmentations to their eyes, as far as she could tell, so there was a strong likelihood that they would be taken in by her illusion. She noted with a smirk that someone had gone through the trouble of stuffing all three of them into poorly fitting tuxedos.

The largest part of undercover work was attention to detail in the person you were going undercover as. As Lucine stepped off the transport, she affected the walk that she had developed for this particular cover: a languid, easy pace that caused her hips to sway in a more pronounced manner. The three goons took note of her, their eyes drawn to specific parts of her anatomy that were decidedly not her face.

But she completely ignored them, swaying up the stairs and barely acknowledging the bulky Trandoshan that opened the door for her. Her pace remained unchecked until one of the goons, a Besalisk, moved to block her path.

"Name, please," he said to her breasts. Judging by the way he stumbled over the words, Lucine wondered if that was the extent of his vocabulary.

She sighed in irritation and tossed her now glossy brown hair over her shoulder. "Ariadne Longrew," she replied coolly, with the slight lilt of a Corellian accent in her voice.

"Longrew..." the Besalisk tore his gaze away from her chest and stared down at the datapad in his hand. He clumsily mashed the interface with one meaty finger, frowning in concentration at the Herculean effort required to look up a name. "Uh-huh, found ya. The party started an hour ago, ya know."

"And I am fashionably late," Lucine replied, maintaining the thin veneer of ice in her voice.

"Uh... okay," the Besalisk said as he struggled to comprehend a four-syllable word. Before he could say more, Lucine brushed past him and continued her slow, swaying progress to the turbolifts. As the doors started to close behind her, she smirked over her shoulder at the goons and waggle her fingers in a mocking wave. Not entirely in Ariadne's character, perhaps, but still entertaining, she decided as the doors slid shut with a hiss.

The turbolift hummed quietly as it carried her to the top floor. As she waited, Lucine glanced into the polished chrome doors and checked her disguise one more time. Based on the layout of the building, it was highly unlikely that there would be any more security outside the elevators; it would be offensive to the party guests, who were primarily upper crust merchants and investors. More than likely, security would be tucked into unobtrusive corners. In the large ballroom packed with people, she would be able to more easily blend in. Too easy, she decided as she offered her reflection a mischievous smile and a wink.

A moment later, the doors slid open, and the Sith found herself face to face with a Shikari Huntress.

The two stared at each other for a long moment, neither moving. The Huntress made no move to reach for the stun baton at her hip, and her face showed no sign of recognition. Lucine forced herself to breathe as she moved past the Huntress, fully expecting an attack to come. The Kiffar only stepped onto turbolift. The doors slid shut, and Lucine took a deep breath. The Technocrats would not have the Shikari here unless this is an important asset, she decided. I am most definitely on the right track.

Still, the presence of the Shikari could prove problematic. It was just one more reason for her to achieve what she had come here to do, and get out in a hurry.

She willed her heart to stop fluttering and set her face into a pleasant smile before continuing down the hall, her heels clicking on the white marble floor. At the end of the short hallway, a set of large mahogany doors stood open, and she could hear music and conversation coming from within. As she suspected, she door was not flanked with security.

She passed through the doors as if she owned the building, and scanned the room. The ballroom was a massive affair, with white marble floors edged with gold. The walls were also made of marble, and flanked with heavy mahogany columns that created convenient alcoves. A security guard stood in each corner, more of the stupid, bulky types.

A crowd of people was gathered in the center of the floor, glittering with expensive gemstones and even more expensive clothing. White jacketed menials wove among the conversing groups, bearing trays laden with hors d'oeuvres, glasses of red and white wine and flutes of champagne. A mahogany bar stood in the northern corner, where a bartender stood ready to make any mixed drink the guest desired. A small band played tasteful music in the southern corner, where the area had been cleared for dancing.

Lucine snagged a glass of red wine from the tray of a passing menial and brought it to her lips. The bouquet was a rich, floral one, with notes of oak wood and mown grass. A high-quality vintage, she noted with approval. Yet despite the quality, she did not drink the wine. She wanted to keep her senses sharp in case trouble arose.

Sadly, the guest list had been quite dull, and the Sith had little desire to mingle with any of the people other than her intended target. She slowly circulated the room as she searched for Elias, idly listening to snippets of conversation as she moved.

She found him at last, chatting with a woman who looked to have some Hutt heritage. The woman was swathed a dress that was obviously a knockoff of a Coruscanti brand and was stuffing hor's d' oeuvres into her mouth at an alarming rate. As she watched, Elias told a joke, which caused the rotund woman to guffaw loudly.

She crossed the space between them and sidled up behind Elias. "Ohh dear. I do hope you did not just tell the womprat and the nerfherder joke," she said by way of greeting.

The former conman whirled to face her, a look of shock and horror on his face. "You!" he gasped. He then stared at her in confusion. Though he recognized her voice, she looked nothing like the way she usually did.

"Me," Lucine agreed as she took his arm, though she did not bother to offer any other explanation. "Sorry, darling, I am afraid I am going to have to borrow him for a moment," she told the half-Hutt woman, before dragging Elias away.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed, once they were out of earshot. "And how is it you're looking like that?"

"Call it good tradecraft, darling," Lucine replied with a charming smile. "As to why I am here, it is to retrieve what is owed to me."

“I already sent you— “

Lucine cut him off with a sharp look. “What you sent me was insufficient, and you know it. Really, darling, did you think I would be assuaged with a few pieces of advertising material? Now, give me what I asked for, and I will be on my way.”

The former conman anxiously ran a hand through his hair as his eyes darted toward one of the security guards. Lucine reached up to grab his chin and drag his gaze back to her. “Do not even think it, darling. If I am going down, I will drag you with me. I think your erstwhile masters will be quite interested to learn who arranged your elaborate cover and would have serious questions for you about your activities. They would most likely have some harsh questions for your lovely fiancée too.”

Elias glared down at her and pressed his mouth into a thin line. Lucine could almost see his mind working as he considered his options. “If I help you then we’re even, right?”

“Of course. You will have repaid my favor, and our business will be concluded,” the Sith replied agreeably. Of course, she would then have sufficient blackmail material to make him dance on her strings for the rest of his life. But there was no need to tell him that yet.

He ran his hand through his hair again, before setting his jaw. “Fine, let’s get this over with. Come on.” He turned sharply and strode toward the double doors that led to the turbolift.

Shikari Huntress number 4728ay-7, codenamed Seven, stalked into the security office and scanned the security feeds. The only thing she saw was soft, society types drinking, eating and talking. As expected, there was nothing amiss. There never was anything amiss.

She gave a low growl of frustration as she lowered herself into her chair. She sat at the edge of her seat, muscles tensed like a loth cat waiting to strike. It was almost unbearable. A Shikari with her level of training, who had once hunted with Kendra Icasta herself, was now forced to provide low-level security services at a party. All because she had failed to find a tracking device that had been planted on a hostage.

It was an insult and a waste of talent. But the Shikari were known for their loyalty as well as their skill. She would remain in this purgatory as long as her masters told her to stay.

Seven scanned the screens again and again as the seconds ticked by. The sound feeds picked up bad jokes, pickup lines and polite conversation, though it was often difficult to hear over the susurrus of a crowd of people gathered in a single room.

“-- let’s get this over with. Come on.”

Seven raised her eyebrows and turned her attention to one of the screens. A man and a woman were leaving the party and getting on the turbolift to go downstairs. It was not uncommon for couples to slip away from parties like these for a discreet rendezvous. But the way the man kept glancing nervously around did not indicate that this was an ordinary affair.

She narrowed her eyes as she studied the man. He was Elias Thorpe, a relative newcomer to Titan Manufacturing. In the few short years since his arrival, he had done everything he could to get in the good graces of upper management. A toady and a suck-up. Seven did not trust him.

The first rule of the Shikari was to trust your instincts. And Seven's instincts were telling her that these two were up to no good. As she picked up her energy bow, she allowed herself a thin smile. Perhaps this was her chance to get back into the good graces of her masters.

The service elevators took her quickly to the nineteenth floor, where the couple had disembarked the turbolift. Seven crept down the hallway on silent feet, her weapon held at the ready. Her aural enhancement allowed her to pick up even the smallest sounds, including the sound of quiet conversation coming from Thorpe's office. As she drew nearer to the closed door, the words became clearer.

"— quit rushing me already." The words were deeper in tone, clearly Thorpe's

"In case you did not notice, darling, I am in a bit of a hurry. And the longer I am here, the greater the risk to you," the woman replied.

"And don't I know it. Look, I am copying the files now. Keep your pants on, already."

Seven paused just outside the door as she heard shuffling within the office. Then, the woman spoke up again. "Oh, these are good. Exactly what I need. Excellent work, darling."

The woman sounded entirely too self-satisfied, and it set Seven's teeth on edge. Whatever these two were up to, it had to be stopped. She slapped the door control with one hand and lifted the energy bow with the other. The door slid open to reveal the brunette and Thorpe leaning over a data screen. Both looked up, and Seven had just enough time to see Thorpe's panicked expression before she fired.

The brunette moved quickly, grabbing Thorpe by the collar and dragging him into cover behind the desk. Seven cursed inwardly as she stepped into the room, holding her energy bow at the ready. A quick scan of her surroundings made her realize that the room was almost too small for her to use her energy bow effectively. She dropped it without ceremony and leveled her repulsor dart shooter instead. "Do not resist. Come out from behind the desk with your hands up, and you might not be harmed."

She heard Thorpe's outraged whisper. "She shot at me!"

"Perhaps she is aware of your perfidious nature," the brunette muttered, before pitching her voice louder. "What assurances do I have that you will not simply shoot me as soon as I show myself?"

"You don't," Seven replied coldly.

"Fantastic," the woman said dryly. She heard someone shifting around, before the woman said, "Very well, you win. I am coming out." Seven shifted her aim as she saw the woman's hands appear first, followed by her head. The woman waggled one of her upraised hands as she said. "Do not shoot, darling. I am unarmed and completely harmless."

Thorpe gave a derisive snort at this, and Seven narrowed her dark eyes to examine the woman. The brunette looked fit, but she wore no obvious weapons. Just another soft noble, Seven thought with disdain. Clearly, she was completely harmless. "You too, Thorpe. I am detaining you as well," the Kiffar said.

"Me? I didn't do anything!" Thorpe squeaked from behind the desk.

"Exactly what a spy would say," Seven replied with a smirk. "Who're you two working for? Tell me!"

The brunette sighed and rolled her eyes. "Oh, fine. You caught us." She grinned wickedly at the Huntress. "We are working for the Brotherhood."

Elias gasped. "What?! No! I'm not with the Brotherhood!" Seven, however, was not listening. She narrowed her eyes at the admission, her finger instinctively tightening on the trigger of the dart shooter. It clicked quietly as it launched a bladed disk at the brunette, only to fly right through her chest and embed itself in the wall behind her.

"Force user!" Seven hissed. Her attuned hearing picked up a scuffling noise from the desk, and she shifted her gaze in time to see the brunette emerge from behind it. She moved quickly, a green lightsaber flaring to life in her hand as she quickly closed the distance between the two of them. Seven reacted coolly, shifting her aim to the new target and pressing the trigger once more.

The dart shooter clicked, and crimson blood bloomed on the socialite's bare shoulder. However, Seven's satisfaction was short-lived, as the Force user slashed with her lightsaber and sliced neatly through the Kiffar's arm at the wrist. The hand and wrist wearing the repulsor dart fell to the floor with a thud and a clank. Seven only had a moment to marvel at the fact that there was no pain before the woman reversed her grip and slammed the hilt of her weapon into her temple. Stars exploded in front of Seven's eyes as she crumbled to the floor.

“You’re a frakkin’ Force user?!” Elias demanded. “Oh hells, oh hells! I can’t be associated with a frakkin’ Force user! They’re gonna kill me. They’re gonna kill me!”

“Quit your gibbering!” Lucine snapped, drawing on the Force to compel Elias into following her command. Elias’s panicked muttering abruptly halted. The Sith smiled grimly as she retracted the blade, before slamming the hilt of the lightsaber down on the Kiffar’s head once more. “That will keep her from getting up for a while. Now, darling, finish copying those files and do hurry. We need to leave in a hurry.”

The man tried to protest, but his mouth refused too open, creating a series of muffled whines. Lucine sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “What is it? Speak up!”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Elias burst out.

“You will if you enjoy living,” Lucine replied as she offered him a smile that chilled him to the bone. “Like it or not, you are implicated as being a Brotherhood sympathizer. Do you know what the Collective does to people like you? Now, I might be able to help you out. But my inclination to help you is directly related to your usefulness to me. Do you understand?”

The former conman paled visibly, confirming that he did indeed understand. “I’ll... I’ll just finish getting those files...”

It was pain that dragged Seven from the darkness. She groaned and rolled to the side, every ounce of instinct telling her to get to her feet. But when she put her hand down to lever herself up, a white-hot bolt of agony shot through her arm.

She opened her bleary eyes and stared down at the stump the remained. Images swam in her mind, a memory of cold emerald eyes, and a lightsaber of similar color shearing through her wrist. The Force user had done this to her. Her rage at the memory burned the haze of unconsciousness away.

She hissed with pain as she carefully got to her feet and peered around the office. There was no sign of Thorpe and the woman. No doubt they were fleeing, now that their cover was blown. There wasn't much time. She stumbled out into the hall and made her way to the emergency alert. By habit, she extended her right hand to the switch, before seeing the stump again. With a grown, she slammed it down with her intact left hand, before reaching for her communicator. The Force user would pay dearly for what she had done to her.

The turbolift doors opened, revealing the delivery dock in the back of the building. Lucine had quickly ruled that they would not be going out the front doors, as it would put them right in the path of the security goons. As the Sith and the former conman wove between the crates and boxes in the dimly lit room, a piercing alarm split the air.

"I guess the Huntress is awake," Lucine panted as she leaned against a stack of crates.

"Yeah, well, you should have killed her!" Elias said sharply. "Why the hell did you leave her alive?"

Lucine opened her mouth to reply but closed it after a pause. She'd had a good reason at the time, but she was having a hard time remembering it. It was getting increasingly difficult to think clearly.

"Hey. Hey, what's wrong with you?" Elias demanded as he noticed that the woman's skin had become increasingly pale, and shone with a fine sheen of sweat. His eyes trailed down to her shoulder, where she had been cut by the Shikari's bladed disk. The skin around the laceration had turned an angry red, with fingers of crimson streaking away from the wound.

Lucine's eyes followed the direction of his gaze, and she plucked at the wound almost dismissively. "... hm. It appears I have been poisoned," she said at last.

"You think?!" Elias exploded.

Lucine sighed an annoyance and lifted a hand to cover her eyes. "Do quit shouting, darling. It will give away our position and is not doing my headache any favors." She took a deep breath and called upon the Force, willing the icy energy to refresh her and push away the headache. The pain receded to a dull throbbing, enough to allow her to concentrate and think. But there was little doubt she would need to stop and deal with the poison soon.

She fumbled through her handbag until she found her communicator. She opened it to a familiar encrypted channel. "Tabriss, darling," she hailed.

"My lady," came the reply over the line.

"It seems we have run into a bit of trouble."

"So I gathered from the alarms," Tabriss replied dryly.

Lucine bit back a sarcastic comment. "What does it look like out there?"

"It appears the party-goers are gathering outside the doors. Most assume that someone pulled the fire alarm as a prank," Tabriss replied. "I have already secured transportation for us. Will you be requiring a distraction?"

"That would be lovely," Lucine replied. "I have a guest accompanying me. We will be out front in five minutes. Be prepared with that distraction."

"As you wish, my lady," Tabriss replied. The hiss of static that filled the line made it clear that he had severed the connections.

"Okay, now I know your crazy," Elias snapped. "Did you forget that they're looking for us?"

"I sincerely doubt the Huntress will be down there looking for us in her condition," Lucine said as she let go of her illusion. Brown hair morphed into wavy red curls, tanned skin became pale as her natural features reappeared. "Which means they are looking for us based on profiles." She reached down and tore her dress just above the knee, shortening it. "There, now I look completely different. Let us see to you, shall we?"

A small door off to the side led to a closet. A couple of pairs of filthy work jumpsuits were strewn across the floor. "Here we are," she said as she gingerly picked up one of the soiled garments.

"This is disgusting," Elias said with a grimace as he accepted the work suit and held it between his thumb and forefinger.

"Ah, but is it worse than enduring interrogation? Because that is what will happen if they catch you," Lucine pointed out. "Get changed, and hurry. We are on the clock, darling."

As she waited for Elias to pull on the modified disguise, Lucine leaned against the wall once more and closed her eyes. There was a strange buzzing in her ears, and the edges of her vision were tinged with a gray haze. Whatever the Shikari's poison was, it was powerful. She took a deep breath, setting the Force power she had freed up by discontinuing the illusion to the task of breaking down the poison that coursed through her body. It would take time, though.

"Yep, I was right. This is frakkin' disgusting," Elias said as he emerged in a pair of blue coveralls that were stained with an unidentifiable substance.

"Well, I am fairly certain it will not kill you," the Sith murmured as she pushed away from the wall. She looked him over with a critical eye, before reaching over to ruffle his combed-back hair with a trembling hand. "That will do."

"Hey, you okay?" the former con man asked. "That poison's not gonna kill you, is it? Because you've gotta get me off this planet."

“No worries on that account, darling. I am tougher than I look,” Lucine replied with a sweet smile.

Tabriss smiled ruefully as he severed the connection on his comm. One thing could be said about working for his Mistress: things were never dull.

The Chiss tucked the communicator into his pocket as he surveyed the scene. Titan Manufacturing stood on a large plot of land that was separated from the surrounding city by a heavy duracrete fence. He could see the gala attendees accumulating on the front lawn in front of the office building, although they were starting to move toward the main gate. No doubt many were calling for their personal transports, as the party was obviously over.

His crimson eyes flicked over the street, searching for something he could use as a distraction and something he could use for escape. They at last fell upon two landspeeders that were parked on the side of the street. Perfect.

He sidled up to the first one, glancing into the windows. The XJ-2 Landspeeder was unoccupied and locked, though the latter was not much of an impediment. The XJ series of landspeeders were relatively easy to slice, which was why it had been his favorite craft to steal in his youth. It would do nicely.

The second landspeeder was a ComfortRide Passenger speeder. A greasy-looking Gungan male sat at the control panel, peering greedily at the group of people assembling at the front. Text emblazoned on the side advertised the speeder as part of the EZ Cab services. So the creature was hoping for a fare.

With a plan firmly in place, Tabriss glanced up and down the street to make sure there was no one nearby. Satisfied that there was not, he approached the EZ Cab. The Gungan saw him and rolled down the window. “Yousa needsa ride?”

“You could say that, sir,” Tabriss replied as he reached into his suit coat as if retrieving his wallet. “How much is the fare?”

The Gungan’s eyes narrowed as he did a quick examination of Tabriss’s fine suitcoat. “Issa 500 cred for the first mile, and— “ His eyes widened when Tabriss pulled a slugthrower from its shoulder holster. “Wait!”

Whatever the avaricious Gungan was going to say was cut off as the Chiss aimed the weapon and fired a short burst. At close range, the slugs tore through the flesh, bone and sinew of the Gungan’s face, causing his body to jerk as blood and grey goo splattered the passenger side window.

“Such a mess,” Tabriss muttered as he glanced up and down the street to make sure that no one was watching. So far, the alarm had not been raised. He moved to the front of the landspeeder and lifted the hood. He retrieved the fragmentation grenade that hung from his belt and set it carefully upon the engine column, before carefully lowering the hood once more.

Satisfied, he returned to the driver’s side, took a handkerchief and carefully wiped what blood he could from the seat before climbing in. Now came the tricky part. He engaged the controls, and slowly maneuvered the speeder so that it was pointed toward the wall, next to the main gate of the manufacturing plant. He positioned the Gungan’s body in the driver’s seat, with one of the cabbie’s wide feet set on the accelerator, before releasing the brake. The landspeeder began to slowly move forward.

Tabriss watched as the landspeeder inched toward the wall, and nodded in satisfaction. One distraction coming up, as his Mistress had commanded. “Now, to see to our escape,” he murmured as he turned toward the empty landspeeder.

Lucine and Elias wound their way carefully through the hallways of the ground floor of the office building, wary of security. Their progress was slow, and Lucine found herself having to occasionally stop to catch her breath.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” the former con man said as they reached the main lobby. The security goons were gone and were most likely out front trying to herd the crowd of wealthy patrons.

“Noted,” Lucine replied, trying to keep her breathing even. “But we are still doing it.” To illustrate her point, she crossed the lobby and strode purposefully toward the front doors. When no one challenged her, Elias hurried to keep up.

They pushed open the heavy doors together and stepped into the bright sunlight. Elias was visibly trying to keep himself from cringing as they did so. One of the security guards, the Besalisk from earlier, glanced their way. However, neither recognition nor anything passing for intelligence flashed in his eyes. “Get with the rest of ‘em,” he told them, jerking his head toward the crowd milling around on the lush lawn. Neither Lucine nor Elias argued as they hurried to join the others.

“So now what?” Elias hissed under his breath.

“Now we wait for Tabriss’s distraction,” Lucine replied, trying to keep her head down. The bright sunlight was making her eyes water and her headache worse.

“Tabriss, huh? What is he, some sort of super-soldier?”

“Nothing like that, darling. He is my butler,” the Sith said, trying to keep her growing weariness out of her voice. Elias stared at her, aghast, and she caught his expression out of the corner of her eye. “Well, he is one hell of a butler,” she added with a shrug.

“Well, at least he is getting us a ride out of here,” Elias muttered as he scanned the crowd and their surrounding environment. The flow of people was moving toward the gates, carrying them with it. “Say, do you think that’s it?”

Lucine glanced up at the landspeeder that was slowly approaching the main gate. “Possibly,” she allowed.

But there was something wrong. The speeder was moving incredibly slowly and was making no move to turn as it drew closer to the edge of the street. It glided onto the sidewalk, still pointed toward the wall. “Wait... something is amiss here,” she said.

The landspeeder inched forward until the front end impacted against the wall. The fragmentation grenade, unseen by the crowd, was knocked from its place on the engine block and landed with a clatter on the floor of the front compartment. The landing triggered the grenade and it exploded, sending shrapnel into the engine block and the fuel compartment.

The explosion as the landspeeder exploded as almost deafening, drawing screams from the assembled crowd. Nerves already frayed, the party-goers began to scatter as they sought cover from the twisted bits of metal that rained down from above. Through the din, Lucine saw another landspeeder set down on the opposite side of the gates. “There is our ride, darling,” Lucine said as she grabbed Elias by the sleeve to keep him from running in the wrong direction. “Let us go.”

They took off in a run, though for the Sith, it was more like a rapid lurch. The poison that ravaged her body was still taking its toll, causing her heart to race, her head to pound, and her muscles to tremble. Every step felt like she was precariously close to falling, but she forced herself to move forward. Her pride would not allow her to fall here.

After what felt like an eternity, they made it to the landspeeder and clamored in. Tabriss waited just long enough for Lucine to close the door behind her before flooring the accelerator. They took off like a shot, leaving the office building and the burning remains of the wrecked landspeeder behind them.

“Just what in the hell is going on down there, Seven?” Even though the viewscreen the Hunt Mistress’s anger was palpable. She fixed the Kiffar with a glare, her single crimson eye filled

with fury. “Are you seriously telling me that, not only did you let a single Force user get the better of you, but you actually the spies get away?”

Seven kept her head bowed, her remaining hand clutching her right forearm behind her back. Her stump radiated with agonizing pain, but she had refused to allow the medic to inject it with an anesthetic. Right now, the pain was helpful. It helped her to focus, while medication would have only dulled her senses. But even as she used it to fuel her rage, she refused to allow any of her agony to show on her face. It would not do to show weakness. “It’s a temporary setback,” she replied as she kept her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her.

Icasta rolled her eyes. “Oh really? Then what, precisely, are you doing to correct this setback?”

“I have sent teams to cover Elias Thorpe’s ship and his apartment. I have also identified the Force user. Her name is Ariadne Longrew, and she owns three properties on Elizabeth-II. All three residences are being monitored, as is her ship. Notifications have been sent to all personnel, and they are on the lookout for both of them. We will find them.” As Seven gave her report, she fought the urge to tug at the dressing that was wrapped around her wrist.

“But you still have no idea what information they stole,” Kendra pointed out.

“Whatever it is, we will confiscate it from their corpses.”

“Hmph.” The single sound carried all of Icasta’s anger and disgust. “Fine. You may continue to act in a leadership capacity for now. But I’m quickly getting tired of your kark ups. Get this resolved quickly, Seven, or this will be your last hunt.”

The Shikari nodded mutely. Icasta made another sound of disgust, and the viewscreen went dark.

Once she was sure that the connection had been severed, Seven allowed herself to take a deep breath. Of course, she had expected this. The Collective leadership did not tolerate repeated mistakes. There was no doubt that failure would result in her death.

Of course, Seven had no intention of failing. The Force user would pay with blood and pain. She would die, and Seven would be redeemed.

Arconan Safe House
Undisclosed location
Elizabeth-II
1748 local time

Lucine slumped on the rumpled bed with her eyes closed. Every ounce of her concentration was going toward maintaining her link with the Force, just to give her body the strength to continue fighting the poison. “Tabriss,” she managed between wheezing breaths, “I suggest that you hurry.” She thought about saying more but decided against it. The six words that she had managed to say had been exhausting.

The Chiss butler bent over a nearby rickety table, the contents of an antidote kit spread out before him. Slender gloved fingers manipulated test tubes as he mixed the contents of several tubes and loaded the resulting concoction into an injection device. He crossed the space of the tiny room in two steps and pressed the injector against Lucine’s arm. “This will sting a bit, my lady.” Lucine only gave a curt nod in response, her sweat-soaked curls falling into her face as she did so. Tabriss pulled the trigger on the injector, shooting the antidote into the Sith’s veins.

Silence fell over the room as the Chiss set the injector aside and pressed his fingers against Lucine’s wrist, checking her pulse. The only sounds that could be heard in the closet-sized safehouse were Lucine’s raspy breath, and Elias’s rapid footsteps as he paced back and forth.

“Well?” the conman demanded at last.

“It appears to be working,” Tabriss replied levelly. “My lady’s breathing is improving already.”

“Indeed,” Lucine said, her voice a little stronger. “I am feeling better already.” She tried to pull herself into a sitting position using her tremulous muscles, but the room spun so violently that she was forced to lay back with a groan.

“I am afraid that even with the antidote and the aid of the Force, you will need a few hours of rest,” Tabriss said as he gently positioned Lucine into a more comfortable position.

“But we don’t have a few hours!” Elias protested. “We have to get off this planet now!”

Lucine sighed and closed her eyes. Her headache was subsiding but was still present. “That is not possible,” she said, trying to keep her weariness out of her voice. “The Collective’s security protocols are remarkably efficient. By now, they will have posted guards on both of our ships. I can barely walk right now, so killing a squad of their soldiers is quite out of the question. And even if I could, they would chase us down and shoot us out of the sky before we cleared atmo.”

Elias ground his teeth as he glared at the redhead. “If we stay here, then it’s only a matter of time before they find us! Damn it! I shouldn’t have listened to you! Now my life is over, and it’s all your fault!” He lashed out with a growl of anger and punched the wall. Pain shot through his hand as the wall refused to yield to his anger, and he yelped with pain as he clutched his now throbbing hand.

Lucine opened one bleary eye to glance at the former conman. "Are you done with your little temper tantrum, darling?"

He did not reply and instead began to pace back and forth again. The room was so tiny that he could only move five steps before he had to turn and pace in the opposite direction. Lucine continued, "Things look grim, but they are not hopeless. Obviously the Collective does not know about this safehouse, or they would have been here already. That means we have time to rest and plan. And as good fortune would have it, I have an idea that could get us off this planet."

"Oh, great. Fantastic! Another amazing plan that will probably get us killed!"

"Well, you could always take your chances on your own," Lucine said dryly. "But we both know that your chances of survival are better if you stay with us. And besides, if you play your cards right, I might be able to get you set up in a comfortable place somewhere else."

"I liked my life here!"

The Sith fought the urge to heave a sigh at Elias's recalcitrance. "That life is over. You knew that would be a risk when you originally made the deal with me. Now, you can either shut up and listen to what I have come up with, or you can continue to carry on like a child. But I will be honest, darling, the latter action carries a significant risk of getting shot. Your constant whining is making my headache worse." She glanced meaningfully at Tabriss, who was glaring balefully at the former con man.

Elias stared first at the Chiss, then at the redhead. Lucine could almost see his mental gears turning as he calculated his odds of survival if he decided to go it alone. At last, he sighed and plopped down in a wooden chair. "Fine. Let's hear it."

She smiled pleasantly. "I am so glad you decided to see things my way. For this plan to succeed, we will need to gather a few things. So, Tabriss darling, I will require you to do a little shopping for me..."

Southern Space Port
Argos City, Elizabeth-II
0537 Local Time

Captain Wallis snapped into a sharp salute as Seven stepped through the door of the small field office the surveillance team had set up. The Shikari barely nodded in acknowledgment of the salute, before moving to study The Viper's Nest through the tinted window on the southern wall. "Captain, I will be assuming the leadership of this team from here on out."

“Yes, ma’am!” Wallis replied smartly.

“Report. Have you found anything here yet?”

“No, ma’am. No one has approached the vessel since we set up.”

Seven gave a curt nod but continued to stare at the ship. With the search for the spies well in hand, she had spent the past several hours thoroughly searching Thorpe’s office. The vague memories revealed to her from the items that she had touched made it clear that he was not the brains of the operation. If the brunette was running the show, then it was most likely that they would try to use her ship to escape. She wanted to be there personally when they were captured.

Curiously, the search had turned up vague memories of a redhead as well. Seven was not sure how she figured into this whole mess, but she had every intention of finding out.

A quiet murmur from the two agents at a nearby console drew her attention. “What is it?”

“We’ve got movement. Three people approaching the ship from the north,” Wallis replied.

The Kiffar looked in the direction Wallis had indicated in time to see three shapes moving through the predawn shadows of the port. All three were swathed in cloaks, making it impossible to discern their features. Still, it was fairly obvious who they were. Seven smiled coldly. “Intercept them. I want them alive.”

The soldiers had been well trained to obey without hesitation. They grabbed their weapons and slipped out of the temporary surveillance shelter to take up hiding positions around the ship.

Seven watched from her vantage point as the three targets drew nearer to the ship. As they got within range, one of them held out a remote, and the rear doors of the ship began to slowly open. It was then that the security team stepped out of hiding, weapons leveled on the trio. “Freeze!” Wallis shouted. “Surrender at once! On the ground, all of you!”

It came as no surprise to anyone that the trio neither surrendered nor got on the ground. Instead, two of them drew weapons, firing red beams of plasma at the security team. The third bolted, making a mad dash for the ship. One beam struck Wallis, but his armor easily deflected the shot. However, the second bolt had been better aimed. It hit the man to Wallis’s left, causing him to crumble to the ground.

But Wallis’s team was unflappable. They shot back, filling the air with plasma bolts. One of the enemies fell, but the other ran for the ship just as the doors began to close. He barely managed

to climb aboard before they slammed shut. The Star Commuter's engines engaged, and the ship began to lift from the launch pad and ascended into the atmosphere.

"Scramble a squad of TIE fighters!" Seven heard Wallis shout over the comms, as his men moved to secure the fallen enemy. There had already been a flight on standby because they screamed overhead a few minutes later in pursuit of the escaping craft. The Kiffar hastily changed the frequency to listen to the chatter of the pilots.

"Target sighted. Attention Viper's Nest, land immediately or you will be brought down. This is your only warning!" Seven shook her head as one of the pilots attempted to hail the fleeing ship. She strongly doubted that they would comply. A moment later, her suspicions were confirmed."

"No response. Weapons hot." She could hear the sound of the laser cannons being fired over the scream of the TIE fighter engines, followed shortly by a loud explosion. "Direct hit!"

A grim smile spread slowly over the Kiffar's face as the pilots relayed the coordinates of the crash site. So, it was done. The spies had been destroyed before they could flee with the information they had stolen. Even better, another Force user had been removed from the galaxy. And yet...

And yet, her satisfaction at knowing that vengeance had been served felt hollow. In a way, it almost seemed too easy. Too neat. Seven always trusted her instincts, and her instincts were telling her that the hunt was not over.

She emerged from the temporary command center and scanned the port with a critical eye. A flash of red caught her attention, and she looked to see three figures about a kilometer away. They were making their way toward an HWK-290 Light Freighter that appeared to have seen better days.

Seven glanced toward Wallis, but he was busy seeing to his fallen team member and the captured enemy. She considered ordering him and his team to accompany her but quickly decided against it. They would have their hands full sorting through the wreckage of the Star Commuter, and she was not entirely sure of what she had seen. Besides, she was a Shikari and she would have the element of surprise on her side. This time, she would not allow herself to be humiliated.

She took off after the three figures, drawing her blaster pistol as she went. The weight of the weapon made her grimace, but it could not be helped; an energy bow needed two hands to fire.

The Kiffar took a circuitous route that would ensure she would not be seen and slowed her pace as she drew nearer to the light freighter. The bay doors were open, and the three people were clustered in front of it. One of them had her hood swept back to reveal her crimson curls. "How much longer?" she said as Seven drew nearer, hidden by a stack of conveniently placed crates.

"It should only be a few minutes more. Air command said the flight ban will be lifted in five minutes," another replied. Though Seven searched her memory, she did not recognize it.

"About time. I can't wait to get off this rock!" said the third, and she immediately recognized the voice as belonging to Thorpe. Seven's lips peeled back into a snarl. "Say, who were those guys that you sold your ship to?"

"Does it matter?" the redhead asked flippantly. "They were just some small-time smugglers who thought they were getting the deal of the lifetime in trading my ship for theirs."

"Yeah, I noticed that they agreed to that deal awfully quickly," Thorpe replied sourly.

"They were, darling. I just had the interior renovated to include more closet space."

The redhead's voice is the same as Ariadne's, Seven realized. So, the Force user could change her appearance. A handy trick. Still, she was glad that she had taken the time to eavesdrop, as it allowed her to choose her targets more carefully. She took a deep breath and leaned out of cover just enough to snap off two shots, the first at the redhead and the second toward Thorpe.

Once again, the redhead moved as if she had been forewarned of the attack. Her green lightsaber flared to life as she whirled, deflecting the bolt with her blade. Thorpe was not as lucky and yelped with pain as the red plasma energy burned into his left thigh. He collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain.

"You again," the redhead said coldly to Seven.

"Me again," the Kiffar agreed. "Drop the weapon. The three of you are coming with me."

"My my, but you are confident! Have you forgotten how our last encounter ended? Are you really in such a hurry to lose your other hand?" The Force user's tone was mocking as she took a few steps away from the ship.

Seven snarled at the redhead's words. "This time will be different." She quickly changed her aim and snapped off a shot toward the Chiss, who was trying to drag Thorpe aboard the ship. He dived into cover, and the beam of energy pinged off of the ship's hull. "It looks like you're not moving as quickly as you were last time. Still feeling the effects of the poison?" she asked as she leveled her weapon on the Force user once more.

"Oh, I am on the mend, darling." Though the woman's response was calm, Seven could easily see that her movements were sluggish, and she still looked pale. "Certainly well enough to take on the likes of you."

The Kiffar smiled grimly. "We'll see." She darted to the side, moving between crates and pieces of equipment as she fired a rapid volley of shots at the redhead.

She's fast, Lucine thought as she angled her blade to deflect the bolts before they could reach her. She moved with the Kiffar, weaving amid the crates and pieces of equipment that littered the dock as she tried to close the distance between them. Though Tabriss's antidote and the aid of the Force had helped her to recover significantly, she knew that she would not be able to keep up with her, or even be a match for her in a one-on-one fight. But there was one benefit to the Shikari's use of cover: it required her to repeatedly take her eyes off of Lucine. That could be useful.

The Huntress darted into view once more and sent a bolt of energy hurtling toward Lucine. She angled her blade, sending the energy back where it came. However, the Kiffar ducked out of sight before it could hit her. As soon as she was out of sight, Lucine ducked behind a pile of crates and closed her eyes, drawing upon the Force. She hastily wove an illusion of herself and sent it running toward a piece of loading equipment several yards away.

Bolts seared into the duracrete as the illusion ran and then dived behind the cover. It then moved again, running toward another stack of crates.

Hoping that the Shikari was suitably distracted, Lucine crept closer to the stack of crates where her target was hiding. She peered around them and saw the Huntress firing madly at the illusion. Perfect.

Trying to ignore the headache that was trying to re-establish itself, she drew once more upon the Force and created a second illusion of herself, this time on the opposite end of the pallet of crates where the Kiffar was running. She then took a deep breath and stepped around the corner into the Huntress's view. The second illusion moved at the same time, appearing on the Kiffar's other side.

Seven took a step back, her gaze moving back and forth between the two Lucine's she picked the one on her left and fired, but the bolt sailed right through the illusion's chest. The real Lucine was already on the move, drawing on the Force to give her muscles strength and speed as she raced to close the distance between the two of them. Her lightsaber caught the Shikari on her shoulder as she was starting to turn toward her, cutting downward and across to her left hip.

Seven's mouth formed an O of surprise as she fell backward, her body cut in two. Lucine doubled over, her breath coming in ragged gasps from the sudden bout of exertion. "You are right, darling. This time was different. I didn't just take your other hand."

She gave the body of the Shikari one last look, before turning to stumble back to the ship. It was time to finish her mission.

Lyra Colony Security Force Headquarters
Lyra Colony
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Amara Cirrus clasped her hands behind her back as she studied the evidence arrayed around her. Nearly every horizontal surface of her office was covered with neatly labeled flimsiplast bags. One table was dominated with a heavy stack of files, containing dossiers of every person killed or wounded in their cowardly attack.

But it wasn't enough. Amara ground her teeth as she scanned the office once more. Other than the comm recordings, there was nothing, nothing that tied the Brotherhood directly to the attack. She could only hope that the evidence presented a compelling enough argument.

A commotion from the outer office drew her attention. Narrowing her eyes, she whipped open the door and stormed out to investigate the source of the noise. "What in the hells is going on out here?"

Jonas darted a quick look back at her, before returning his gaze to the man with brown hair that was greying at the temples. "This man claims— "

"My name is Elias Thorpe," the man said, cutting Jonas off. "I am here to formally defect from the Collective. And, as a peace offering, I've brought you some evidence about their involvement in the attacks against you." As he spoke, he held up a data disk with a grin. "So, let's talk, yeah?"

Unnoticed by everyone, a small Skitters unit observed from a nearby window.

A short distance away from the Lyra Colony Security Force Headquarters
Lyra Colony
Lyra-3K-a System

"Well, he is in," Lucine said as she watched the feed from the Skitters unit on her datapad. "The evidence has been delivered and we survived to fight another day." She tapped a few buttons on the interface, ordering POR-7 to return to her.

"Indeed, my lady. Will you celebrate with a cup of tea?" Tabriss asked.

"Tea, a hot bath and a nap," Lucine said. "I will need to be well-rested and fortified before I report to Rhyllance." When Tabriss raised an eyebrow, the Sith explained, "He had two

stipulations for this mission: no using my lightsaber and no flashy heroics. Now I am going to have to come up with a suitable lie to explain why I broke both of his requirements.”

“I have no doubt you will be equal to the task, my lady,” Tabriss said.

“I certainly hope so. So much for an easy mission,” the Sith said with a sigh. “Oh well, at least the evidence has been delivered. Hopefully, the rest of this conflict will be resolved much more easily than this was.”