

**Dajorra System**  
**Hyperspace**  
**37 ABY**

"...have to...boots on the ground? Nae, not tha whole bloody fleet, even I know that'd start...no!  
...ow am I s'posed ta know? I..."

"Darling, do listen for once, we must...my agents...I can...Violet..."

"...says we're attacking..."

"...w did they get...our codes..."

The words were *words*, they meant something, she knew they did. They were important, she knew they were. She heard them, she did, she knew what was happening. Diplomatic relations going to kark. Big attacks on Lyra where the meetings were taking place in Principate space. Attacks by "Brotherhood" ships. There was footage, secondhand, coming back to them from their representative. They damn well looked like Brotherhood ships. Big old Brotherhood symbol and all, which most of the Iron Navy's ships didn't even have painted on their hauls, but what did reality matter? The presented picture was a lot prettier to gawk at. It looked like they had just staged a multifaceted, forethought assault on their potential allies.

She knew that.

But *Shadows*, she just couldn't stand to hear more bad goddamn news right now.

She was so sick and tired of feeling *unsafe*. That was the word, really. Not afraid, not terrified, because it was easy enough to get through daily life. They had to. The world didn't stop. It was still there, turning, waiting for them to wake up every day and take showers and have clothes washed so they had them to wear and to go to work around rebuilding their city and supporting their Clan and to take care of their daughter and make sure *she* had clean clothes and ate something that wasn't crap prepackaged, vacuum-sealed soldier food and that she got training for her powers and that she was happy. Somehow. Whether or not they were. To make sure they kept functioning no matter how much it felt like they were *falling the frak apart*, in pieces, and spending every day trying to pick up all the parts, too many at a time, with overflowing hands, so they just kept dropping things one after another, a different part of life falling out of her fingers every damn day because she couldn't keep it all together no matter how hard she tried to focus on picking up one piece, inevitably, another would fall and she'd fail and and and—

And none of that just stopped no matter how she was feeling so they just kept going. But it was still always there, that lack of safety. That crawling in her own skin because she and all the people she loved were constantly in danger just... Just *for existing*. For having the bodies they

had. It didn't stare them in the face every day, back home, but *she* was always staring *at it*, out of the corner of her eye, always constantly kind of aware, waiting, paranoid, horrified, for it to creep up and threaten her again. To take everything away. It was the worst when she was reminded, when the Collective attacked a supply line or bombed their homes or now when they somehow frakking managed to turn an entire system of people against them when for frakking *once* the Brotherhood hadn't done a damned thing—

*Frak, frak, frak, frak, frak frak frak, get your head in the game!* Satsi mentally shrieked at herself. She had never had to prove her own *innocence* before. Not when it was freaking *true*. How the hell was she supposed to show the higher ups and the folks of Lyra Colony that the people bombing them weren't who they looked like?

She had no goddamn clue. But. She HAD to pull this off. She had to. If and didn't...

Would they ever see their kid again?

She started laughing. Low at first, high in pitch but quiet, more little gasps; and then, louder. Uncontrollably.

"*Uh...Sats?*" And there was Kord, over the comm, because she was still in a holographic conference call while she flew over across the way to their neighbors in Principate space to try and *do something*. "*You okay?*"

"It's fine, it's fine, everything is fine, it's fine, I'm fine," she said.

Laughed.

So. She might be panicking. Joy.

"*Why does tha' sound like ya ain't?*"

"Don't you worry, Kordy," Satsi replied, turning her fear into pain and her pain into forward momentum because what else was there to do? Pain was good, pain was progress; that was why she *liked* it. She didn't have to make her smile manic or cruel, didn't have to pretend that. "I'm going to frakking fry these frakkers. I'll find us something. You watch."

"*We are very confident in your stubbornness, darling,*" Lucine commented, saccharine and sibilant as the snake she was.

"First smart thing you've ever said, Pretty Eyes," the woman growled back, and tightened her grip on the yolk of her control console. "I'm going to be passing into Principate space soon. Going comm silent until I've got something."

"*Goodluck, Tameike,*" Rhyrance stated, and from him, Satsi wasn't sure how to take the statement. The scientist-slash-Proconsul didn't believe in luck. He didn't believe period, all about facts. He didn't give platitudes as a doctor either, not unless it was for patient benefit, and even rarely then. Maybe she was more transparent with these people than she thought.

But she'd take a little patronization right now. It pissed her off, and that anger cleared her head, hot and clean. Like fire.

She smoldered, and grit her teeth, breathing deep. So she was going in blind and deaf into a kark-up, so what? So she might lose everything if this all went sideways, so what?

Satsi was good at her game, and it was time to play, and Satsi refused to frakking *lose*.

"Tameike, out," she answered, and meant it in more ways than one.

### ***Lyra-3K-a system Hyperspace***

Satsi pondered her options on her approach to the Lyra colony.

Her first thought, because it was the Collective — it had to be — was to get her disguise kit out and present herself as Santhen, but it made no sense. Her persona of a Technocratic agent wouldn't be able to give information Satsi herself didn't have to the Principate. And, Satsi didn't know if the Technocrats were participating in this little false flag attack; it could be an entirely Liberal Front or Capital Enterprises operation. She hadn't even known to look out for this. How was Santhen to find her own brethren, and then what? Hope she got access to the right unsecured terminal on the right capital ship to get some sort of operation info? Kidnap one of her superiors or fellows? Doing so would be putting a bullet in Santhen, burn the identity, and Satsi had spent the last two years securing the woman's place as one of Kerwin Drake and Tissflorin's trusted soldiers. Could she really afford to light that fuse now? Was this the time? Once they knew they'd been infiltrated once, doing it again would be all but impossible. What if something more urgent and more appropriate for Santhen to access came up? What about all the lowkey intel she got when Santhen reported in to Kerwin? It would be lost, all of it, and Santhen was the only reason Satsi knew so much about the Guild or Collective at all right now, one of the best sources Arcona's DIA had for dossiers, and part of why they had been able to recover after Enterprises had attacked them and the Jedi at Canto Bight.

Was it worth it? Especially when she had so little to go on?

No, she decided. No assuming there was a foothold for Santhen to take. She'd have to go in low to the ground and skulk for information first. Get a sense of the place. She knew about the Principate in general, had dealt with the Hutts in the Black Sun, but none of them knew

whatever speck of space constituted the Lyra system and its supposedly single habitable dirtball.

"Alright," she murmured to herself, decided, as her flashy personal freighter cruised slowly towards the planet under the watchful eye of an entire damn Collective battlegroup — Shadows. It was a good thing she and everyone else intended to come in small, stealthy batches. They'd get blown to bits if they'd jumped the fleet. Thankfully, none of the battleships directly hailed her; instead the comms came from ground control on Eorilia's Moon, and she quickly rattled off her excuses of being local color come to help with the work. The people on the other end weren't as careful as they ought to have been, for all the suspicion in their radio-scrambled voices. Bunch of settlers and civilians, the lot of them. Hadn't military service been mandatory for these people?

*Easier for me, Satsi thought, and then, probably the only bit of luck I'll frakking get.*

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Screening and entry took a couple annoying hours. She was, though, carrying cargo fit for aid as part of her cover, had no other passengers, and bore no recognizable insignias. The random colonists had no reason to know her face like the Collective did. Satsi found herself ground-side and assigned to clean up before the moon's day cycle had reached its zenith.

After that, though...

It took her almost a full damn two days of grueling work herding panicked faces to various shelter points and hauling fallen scrap and TIE remains to even find out who the leader of the colony was. Everyone was panicked the first day she got in from the attacks, and debris was still burning, nevermind any clean-up being underway. No one wanted to talk, and most of the people obviously recognized she wasn't one of the colonists they knew. Such was the damn difficulty of a small population.

She played it off as being a member of the security force newly arrived newly arrived to help the colonists. To said security force, she introduced herself as a colonist. It wasn't as if either group of them could confirm or deny her lie just yet, not in the current chaos, or had reason to investigate. The Collective frakkers were pretending to be heroes. They mostly went about starting to organize volunteers to clear wreckage and handing out damn water canteens.

But she finally got to talking to some people here and there, either pretending to be an investigator and asking for information as if part of a due process, or listening to complaints while huddling around a pop-up soup line or aid station with other beaten-down looking, innocent little settlers. The Lyra colony was led by a governor, and the current one was named Jar'deon Blazio. He was, depending on who you asked, an idiot, a power-grabbing

monkey-lizard, a heartless bastard, or a politician, which was redundant, since it meant all of the above to the citizenry he'd been charged with. Seemed he'd gotten elected mostly by showing up when nobody else wanted to and by being marginally more competent than his one running opponent. Nobody had cared that much for how he did his job— until now, when everyone actually paid attention. Crises were good for that.

The real gem came on that second night, sitting with some of the colonists, a group of volunteers for the still-growing school system and parks services — apparently they'd been making efforts to get kids out around the safer areas outdoors here, since Lyra was pretty damn beautiful, as long as they steered clear of the wildlife. They were bemoaning the interruption of their project, but mostly the endangerment of their families.

"I don't know what to tell my kids," sighed one Zeltron woman, nearly purple for how dark red she was, like wine. Her pheromones made it easy to feel just as upset and fearful, and Satsi swallowed it all like a mouthful of tar. It made the others upset too, and they'd all taken a quick turn to worrying like a riled up tip-yip coop. "They wanna go look at the wrecks. I can't just say stay inside, they know I'm bothered, it's not good enough. I can't tell them we're in danger!"

"Just tell them no, whether or not they find it good enough. You're their mother, they don't need to have a reason," added another woman, a Chiss. Beside her, her partner, a Human, nodded.

"Maybe that works in your house, Blee, but not in mine," snapped the Zeltron back, and Satsi snorted.

"She's right, kids are smarter than you give 'em credit for, and if you lie to them or try to blow them off, they'll resent it," she advised, and some of the parents nodded while others narrowed eyes at her. She'd seen less murderous glares from *actual serial murderers*. Someone save her ass from the freaking mom squad.

"You don't even live here, Noma, what do you know?" hissed the Chiss, crossing her arms.

"I got a daughter back home, Blee, I know enough. And I'm just saying."

"Well what would you tell her?"

"Honestly, Zeytra, I'd tell my girl we were in trouble. Or some version of it. Maybe that the wrecks hurt people and that she needs to not go there so they don't get more hurt. They need space to rest."

"That's terrible!"

"My kid, not yours." She shrugged. "I said probably. I don't really know what I'd do. I don't want to scare her, ever, but...if it kept her safe, I mean, isn't that best?"

The Chiss was glaring at her, but the Zeltron seemed more intrigued than before. She felt supported. Good. That was the point. Little bits of truth, little bits of lies. It all worked in the end.

They moved on as a whole to another topic, something about debating safety and security against...whatever, who frakking cared about what plants went outside the recreation building once it got rebuilt. The Zeltron was eyeing Satsi again and again, so Satsi waited patiently, sipping her lukewarm caf from a hand-out tin.

"...say, Noma?"

"Yeah, Zeytra?"

"How old is your girl?"

"Three, going on four," Satsi-as-Noma answered easily, but with no less pride. "Honestly, all I can think about is her, and how she's home getting bigger without me. This job bites sometimes. Not," she rushed to assure, feigning a bit of fluster, "that I won't be doing my best to protect you all. It's still my job. It's just hard."

"I couldn't be away from mine, so I'm really glad you're here instead. That's selfish, I know, I'm sorry, but still," the Zeltron said sincerely, comfort and empathy rolling off her in waves as she took Satsi's hand. The Arconan resisted the urge to recoil or hit her with expert ease, instead leaning into the touch, going for a tentative, friendly one-armed hug. "What made you join um...what was your company called again?"

"Don't worry about it, you've got bigger things on your mind. I just wanted to make some good credit and maybe help a bit, you know? Thought it would be boring, like watching for shoplifters at the markets, but this is a bit different."

"Is that how you got, um," it was impossible to tell if the burgundy alien blushed, but she seemed embarrassed enough as she gestured at her own face in indication of Satsi's.

Satsi considered as Noma made awkward gestures, rubbing at the back of her neck. Zeytra had mentioned earlier that it was just her and her several children, had pointedly avoided any mention of a co-parent at all, really. *Worth a shot to angle for more sympathy?*

It wasn't a lot to go on, but someone as jumpy but clingy as she'd seemed to be...

"Ah, no," Satsi said, making her voice waver just a tad. "These...my uh. My husband wasn't the...kindest man. And I stayed with him longer than I should have. Part of what made having a job where I got to carry a gun so appealing, you know? But now that it's just me and my girl, I feel like I'm messing everything up, leaving her with my sister so much..."

Truth and lies, truth and lies.

*More truth than not.*

Zeytra's expression did a full on speeder circuit show, round and round from stunned to horrified to angry to soft and pitying and made of damn hugs. Which Satsi promptly got more of.

"I'm sorry, Noma. I understand, really. But it's okay, you're doing your best! I came to Lyra to get away too."

When most of the hugging was over, Satsi-as-Noma bit her lip and sighed. "Is it a good place here? Besides, well, this I mean..." she waved around at the smoking craters of former buildings that they were camped outside.

"It is. It might not seem like it right now, but we're trying hard. I bet you you could find work here if you wanted. Security work! Chief Cirrus is amazing, you should meet her. Oh, I could introduce you! When she's less busy, anyway. How about that? Think about it! Once this mess is over you can come bring your daughter here and join our force and help build something!"

*Shadows, talk about eager.* And Satsi could tell the Zeltron meant it too, thanks to those damn pheromones projecting all her feelings. Clearly the woman saw a potential friend in her character.

Satsi smiled brightly, clasping Zeytra's fingers. "I don't know, but...that sounds pretty amazing! You really know the head of security here?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm actually one of the secretaries in Governor Blazio's office, so I see her all the time! She's usually not that talkative but she likes us a lot better than Blazio, the pig."

"Oh, is he rude? He's not...well..." she lowered her voice in scandal, "a pervert?"

"No, no, nothing like that—" *Damn, that'd have been so frakking easy.* "But he's awfully slimey, you know? Every time I'm in the room with him, I have to feel how much he likes himself, ugh! Guy doesn't care about us at all. At least Chief Cirrus is determined. She'll fix all this, you watch."

"Tell me more about her? I mean, before I could even think of staying..."

The Zeltron talked on, and Satsi listened, and listened close.

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She considered hard, before she went to the Governor's office on the third day. Approach Cirrus or Blazio. From what she'd gleaned, Cirrus was more competent all around, but didn't seem too attached to Lyra colony. There were rumors she hadn't chosen to be here, centered on everything from a mistress and one of the Principate's Triumvirs to mutterings about war criminality or dealings with Hutts. Clearly, residents on some backwater, tiny colony, pretty or not, didn't have a lot to do when they weren't building except gossip. But, it was at least possibly useful.

Blazio sounded more straightforward, really. Satsi had spent twenty years playing political types like freaking instruments. She knew how to handle his sort, despite individual quirks he'd surely have. If he was really as focused on climbing the ladder as his critics seemed to think, then he was the safer bet. Satsi had no way to know just how accomplished and how keen Cirrus was. The same was true of Blazio, but at least with him, she had a motivation, and that would have to be enough. She'd worked with less.

Which was how she ended up requesting a meeting with the man, after a little more leaning on Zeytra and a little bit of schmoozing of one of the aides managing traffic in the office that evening. The young man, a communications assistant, was more than happy to move her up the queue in the governor's itinerary for the day if it meant some time getting happy in the nearest refresher. More direct than her average play, but it worked for a quick turnaround.

And boy, was the kid quick.

Satsi batted her eyes and threw him a smile over her shoulder when she got called into the governor's office. Amidst the stations of his fellow aides, he smiled back, beaming, really, proud as a nexu with its hunt.

"...better have some good news for me— oh. Hello, there. I apologize, I was expecting my Chief Security Officer next. Who are you, ma'am?"

Jar'deon was even more unremarkable than she'd been picturing from the talk about him. Pale and pudgy and old in the face to the point that his cheeks looked like spoiled dough, with oil-slicked hair that had to be dyed to be such a bright black; she'd know, she'd done hers enough. Probably to hide grays. He had dark eyes and the man was tall, evident as he stopped, clearly having been pacing impatiently.

His expression had gone from petulant and furious to shaking with a wan smile that tried to be coy in seconds, so at least he was trying. She wondered if he was normally better at this, without the stress of a bomb getting dropped on his home.

Shadows knew she'd been *stressed* for the same.

Damn the Collective. But, first—



"Governor Blazio, yes?" she asked, waiting for the door to slide shut behind her and looking around. They were alone in his office, which was rather lush, considering he held a minor position in the middle of nowhere on the only settlement around and hadn't even been chosen so much as picked by default. Nobody had a wood desk like that without thinking highly of themselves. "I was, um, hoping to speak to you, Governor, sir..."

He seemed to be struggling with his earlier nerves — or temper? was he the kind? — but put forward a polite nod.

"Yes, yes? What is it?" His gaze took in her armor. "Are you one of Cirrus' girls? Did she send you to report instead? That careless thing. I told her, she only spoke to me."

He was starting to look upset, which made him sweat. Satsi rushed to soothe.

"No! Um, no, sir, I just...I'm with the new security force, and I'd heard a lot about your efforts and...well, now this is embarrassing. My commander says you've got a plan but things are so bad...I was just hoping to hear you say in person we'd all be okay."

His eyes lit up. Yeah, ego alright. She could use that. His meaty fingers rubbed together at his side while he licked lips in anticipation, little habits, probably. Being his excitement at being the center of seemingly positive attention.

"Of course we will, my dear. I am going to ensure it, for all of us. Listen to the officers I've chosen; listen to me. I'll see us through this. You may be assured of that."

Satsi sighed in relief, walking right up to him to fawn, only to pull into a clumsy salute, like someone flustered. "R-right! Of course, Govrnor. Thank you. I'm sorry I barged in here without an appointment, really."

"Not at all, my dear. Though, I do have very important matters to attend to, so...?"

"Of course! Um. Just one more thing?"

"Yes?"

She reachd out and clamped a hand around the back of his neck, fingers digging into the small rolls there, and forcibly shoved him back down into one of the many plush chairs.

"Oomph—"

Satsi cut his protest off with a hand slammed over his mouth. She wasn't rough, but firm. Her goal wasn't to intimtade here.

"Great, now that we're settled, we can actually chat. I'm not actually with your little force, no. I'm more of a free agent. It's not important. What is important is what's going on here with you all on Lyra, the Collective — you might just know them as Capital Enterprises — and the Brotherhood."

His eyes rolled about and he tried to give a muffled shout. She shook him a little.

"Oi! I'm not going to hurt you, Blazio. Now, I'm going to move my hand, so you're not going to scream, okay? We'll trust each other."

As soon as her fingers lifted—

"HEL—"

And back went the hand.

"Shut. Up! I'm *not* here to hurt you, not unless you piss me off. I'm here to offer information, and get a little too. It's about profit. Not an attack. Eh?"

"Why should I trust that?" he wheezed when she let him talk again.

"I don't need you to frakking trust me, you slime stain, I just need you to shut up, listen, and be willing to take the credit for saving your town. All by yourself. No help from that badass security officer of yours, no help from some random chick, just your own smarts and skill...You know, real rewardable skill...You get me?"

By the look in his eyes, insatiably hungry and curious under the wariness, he got her alright. Being half in his lap might have helped.

"...what concern are the Principate and Brotherhood to you?"

"I want things. Those Brotherhood guys will be paying good to show you this attack wasn't them."

"How can you possibly say it wasn't them? They declared it! I'm not trading on nonsense."

"It's true, and I can show you. I just need a little bit to go on. C'mon. Throw me some scraps here so I can play dog and follow my nose, eh?"

"And why would you allow me to claim credit if you're trying to sell this information? I have no intention of paying you, who have accosted me in my office."

"Honey, this ain't me accoustin'. But fine. It's personal. I just need this to not all blow up right here and right now between any of you people or them and I'm pretty sure you'd prefer that too. Way easier to get rich and famous when you're not dead in a war. So, whaddaya say? Let me try helping my way?"

A pause.

"What do I call you? How do I contact you? And how can I be sure you'll deliver as promised?"

"Call me Blood, I'll come back to you, and you can't. But I can't be sure you won't arrest me for trying to deal with you, so we're even."

His dark eyes narrowed at her, but he seemed almost...amused.

And eager.

"Very well. See what you can come up with, mercenary."

"I just need to know some things from you..."

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Blazio hadn't had much — just what the Principate at large did — but it was still more clues than she'd started with. Satsi sat in her freighter, sifting through the holofeed of the various attacks from four days ago and taking notes to herself.

She paused over the image of the Thuvis Shipyards getting lit the hell up by a frigate with the Brotherhood's star emblazoned on it.

"Huh..." Satsi muttered, then grimaced. She frakking hated Vasano, but...

But now wasn't the time for pride or hate, so she opened one of the encrypted channels on her communicator and sent a message.

*[I need you to get me anything you can on the Pride. Iron Navy vessel, Ton-falk class Escort carrier. That's all I've got.]*

She waited less than half a minute for a reply from the Qel-Droman Quaestor and head of their whole frakking spy network.

*[I will have it looked into, darling.]*

Well then. What now?

Her brown eyes went back to her datapad. The shipyards were practically on lockdown with the Elysium battlegroup hanging around them, nowhere else to park a frakking fleet. So, that particular debris field wasn't an option. The colony was mostly in chaos and going back probably wouldn't help right now. That left either trying to get onto the *Nixon*, where not only D'slan, Arcona's agent, but also the Deputy and all the other Clans' agents, had been detained in total silence the last week...or trying to see what the incident with something at Terminos Excavations on this moon of Thillion had to offer her.

She glanced briefly out her viewport at the shadow of one of the destroyers in Elysium blocking out the stars.

*Mines it is.*

-x-

Shadows, but mines stank. Miners stank. She stank, after not having really bathed in days, fitting in amongst the currently-desperate colonists. Satsi wiped at her brow and raised her voice to the nervously chattering crowd before her. It was small, less than fifteen people.

"Everyone, please stay calm. I'm here with the rest of the security force. We're just trying to get any information we can. Did anyone see anything during the accidents occurring five days ago? Any suspicious figures, anyone you don't recognize?"

The several frightened and wary faces shook their heads. Satsi eyed them carefully despite her calm, approachable facade, trying to spot anything odd. Men and women both, though more men, more on the physical labor side, it seemed, mostly Humans, some Twi'leks, a Zygrerrian man, *huh*, but he had his ears folded back and looked as scared pale and dazed as the rest of them, dust covering his miner's clothes.

None of them spoke up. The foreman beside her shook his head.

"Look, officer, like I saids, nobody saw anythin'. Nothin' but rocks comin' down on this poor shift. Weren't nothing to see except bad equipment. Happens. Mining is dangerous, missy. But it weren't none of me or my workers' faults, now, you hear?"

"I'm not trying to accuse any of you, I assure you," Satsi-as-an-officer insisted levelly. "Just...if any of you feels like talking, come find me, yes?" She handed over a stack of business cards, but no one moved to take any. They only stared until she left, and then the foreman dismissed them.

The woman lingered, hoping for someone to approach her, split off from the pack, but after almost an hour, it was obvious no one felt like talking. She tried to hide her scowl and squash her panic. She needed something to *go on*, dammit, she had to *do this*.

She retreated back to her ship, again, to await a message from Lucine, and pretended not to go crazy waiting.

-x-

*[Darling, see the attached info packet. Best travels, now, do try not to make matters worse.]*

It was something.

And it wasn't enough.

-x-

"What am I supposed to do with this? What even is this? I asked for proof, not manifests."

"It's information on that ship that attacked your shipyards. Yes, the haul sure says it's the *Pride*, but like that all says, the *Pride* was a Brotherhood ship that was registered as lost *two years ago*. In some other skirmish between the Collective and the Brotherhood. It's not even a vessel in their fleet anymore, according to those records. It had to have been salvaged or something to do just this— false flag attacks."

"That's nothing but a story! These files could be doctored, they could have come from anywhere. I have a slew of interns who could mock this up on their terminals."

"What more do you want?"

"How about a suspect? How about something solid? Eyewitnesses, or a bomber. A surviving pilot of the enemy! *Someone to hold up as the villain*. You want me to believe you, to be able to use this? I need something to *work with*. Get me better than a story, Blood, or whatever you fancy yourself."

-x-

She broke everything that wasn't bolted down inside the ship then sat on the floor and screamed for maybe six minutes straight.

She refused to cry.

-x-

It was dark, back at the mines. Satsi had to move quietly and slowly, trying to sneak around in heavy armor and heavy weapons. She didn't really have a plan at this point, except to hope to find evidence of Technocratic technology, perhaps, or maybe stumble onto Rath himself having a goddamn tea party.

Yeah, that'd happen.

Really, anything would do. They had to still have agents in the Lyra sector. The Collective never left anything to chance, always orchestrated their moves just like they had the first three-pronged attack and the seizure of the Brotherhood's diplomats.

There had to be someone here she could *beat*.

The Arconan wandered around for a long time, breathing fumes and sweating next to still-cooling mining machinery that wasn't in active use. The operation hadn't been entirely shut down by the attacks, just crippled, and there were still workers around in other areas trying to clear rubble. Kyber crystals glowed in piles here and there. She debating snatching a handful. Sammy would love them.

She was just considering it and whether or not they'd explode if she touched them when she nearly ran into a figure. They both pulled back at the last second, though. Satsi blinked at the tall, handsome Zygerrian from that morning and fell immediately into her role as some peacekeeper, changing her stance to that of someone with a stick reamed up their rear and lifting her chin like she knew the power to beat someone half to death in the name of the law was well in her grasp. But still friendly. Just a tad.

"Oh, it's you again."

"I could uh, say the same thing, Miss. Or, Miss Officer? Terrible sorry, I don't know how you're expectin' to be talked to."

"Everyone else went home. What're you doing here? It's not safe. There's terrorists around!"

The Zygerrian slumped. "I'm just here for work, okay? My barracks— it were bombed clean out. The collapse, it took the whole damn thing. I ain't got no where to go back to, is all. I'm stuck stayin' here in the facility with some others."

"That so? I'm sorry, sir, I truly am. I promise, we'll get justice from those responsible for this."

She made her words comforting, added a liberal dash of righteous anger to the tone. Anyone who worked with the Collective was goddamn righteous. The man's ears flicked a little uncomfortably.

"Righto, justice. Begging your pardon, or whatever, but personally, I'm just hopin' ta get paid by the end of this and find some work a bit somewhere safer."

"Of course, of course. Those ought to be your concerns, citizen. It's *my* job to make sure that happens." Her gaze tracked him, watching the eyeshine in his own predator's stare in the dim, damaged lighting. "Catching the perpetrators. Making them pay."

"Perpetrators? We was told this was an accident, equipment malfunction 'cause of some damn idiots who made 'em not bein' right with their stuff."

"Oh, certainly, you were told that. But with the other attacks about the system, we have reason to believe that this too was deliberate. A case of sabotage, or arson."

The Zygerrian blinked rapidly, shoulders pinched, all the responses one would expect of some random miner being cornered by some random security officer and informed his workplace hadn't just blown up but might have been deliberately attacked.

"A-arson?! Oh, kark," he yelped. *Afraid*.

Satsi believed it. Actually believed it, just like earlier.

Which was what made her paranoia skyrocket.

*Frak it*, she thought. If she was wrong, she'd just disappear and abandon the moon as a source. But if she wasn't...

"Yes, you heard me, arson. Did you know, arsonists tend to return to the scenes of their crimes? They like seeing their work. Makes them happy." She dropped the accent, dropped the tone, dropped her expression and demeanor, all of it. Bared her teeth. Maybe it was even a smile. "I sure liked seein' it, when I burned motherfrakkers alive back on Corsuscant."

He balked, recoiling from her.

"B-burning people?!" A few steps back. "Stay away from me! Are— you— I'm done answering questions!"

"Nah, think you aren't. You're going to answer all my questions, and all the governor's questions. You're going to tell them all about whatever you did here, the Collective's plan, all of it."

"The what? Who? I'm— not, no, no, no no, please, please, just leave me alone," he stuttered and gasped, chest rapidly expanding with fear and confusion.

"I'll give ya this, one liar to another, I almost believed you. Did earlier. Would've forgotten your damn face entirely if I hadn't found you here. But, not quite. I know you're pretending. Now, drop the belt and the guns. You're not cute enough for us to be matching." She jerked the barrel of her own weapon at him.

"I'm cute as hell," retorted the man sharply, and, that was it— a sudden slip of character. Mark made. He blinked hard even when she inhaled sharp and short, seemed to realize himself. His posture relaxed as he straightened up, and she put her finger on the trigger, but he didn't flinch at her gesture like he probably should've if he'd still been playing. Instead, the frightened demeanor of a hapless civilian melted away in a blink, and the man sighed, stroking his chin, over bony spurs. He cocked a hip, smiling devastatingly charmingly. "Okay, okay, so I'm not so spineless, fine, bit of acting to get people to not bother me, but— c'mon, now. I don't know you, you don't know me, but really, I'm just trying to survive here like anybody else. Those scars say you get that, right? Just let me go. I just wanna go. This whole mining gig ain't worth dying for."

"Drop it, already, you're no miner."

"*Fine*, be specific, I'm a *demolitions expert*. I'm here to make the holes the miners go into. But I'm really not whatever this— Collection person you think I am."

"Mmm, yeah, a bit of truth does make the best lies. But like I said." The muzzle flashed, gunpowder *cracked*, and the Zygerrian jumped as a bullet buried itself in the metal behind his furry ears. "I. Don't. Believe you. And I'm really, really, really not feelin' like playin' the game right now, much as I normally would. So, talk."

A tense few seconds, as he looked between the bullet hole, her, and the distance between them. Looked her over. Judged, carefully. And then finally he seemed to relent, blowing out a breath. "You really are going to shoot me, aren't you? Damn Siths."

"Not a Sith. Normal, just like you."

"Might I suggest changing teams? Come away with me, maybe? I am *very* likable, promise. And good with my hands."

"Kinda married to one of the magic mind murder types, sorry, sugah."

"And?"

She lifted a brow. "And like I said. You're not cute enough for a party."

"I'm wounded," he purred, and she'd give it to him, it was likeable. "Alright, Miss Trigger-Finger. What gave me away?"



"Don't see many of your kind around places like this," said the woman, silky and cruel. "Nice little mining colony in a nice little *totally-not* Imperial warlord state...real harsh about their laws, these types. No slaves to be had here...y'know, or so they like to say."

"Not everyone is a walking stereotype," the Zygerrian replied, and the Human smiled an expression that wasn't a smile.

"You're right about that. But see, most *are*. That's why it's good to have them in your tricks. And you don't look or act like some reformer. So here's my guesses...you ARE a slaver, and you're just working with the Hutts that run half this sector to keep the trafficking quiet, which is why you're so good at acting...you're a plant, and you're up to something here, which is also why you're so good at acting...or you AREN'T either of those and you're actually just some nice guy in the wrong place at the wrong time. But, that one is pretty unlikely."

"And what makes you say that?"

"I might not be an expert, but I burnt enough frakkers alive that I know what rhydonium and detonite smell like, you kark-stain, and a bunch of sithspit just went boom. Sure, maybe that would've been because you really were just some demo guy, but I would've shot out your knees anyway and we'd be in the same place." She cocked the hammer on her pistol for a second time. "So. Let's talk."

"Hmmm... depends on your idea of talk. You just said you'd blow out my knees, which would be painful as hell, so not only are you trigger happy, you're violent... like a lot more didn't make that obvious. You're armed to the teeth. I honestly couldn't tell without asking that you weren't one of those Force-Users or not, not looking at you, and you've even got one of their weapons."

Her eyebrows raised at that. The lightsaber was well-concealed at the small of her back. He was observant.

"But I'm not."

"But you *are* Human, so that means they weren't out to murder you, so, good for you, huh?"

"Nah, *your* lot are just out to murder me and my family for being born with powers. So. You know. *So much better than Pravus.*"

"Hey, Lord Oligard might be a bit over the top, but the Front gave me a chance to make my mark. You people just tried to kill me. Seems fair. I get to live on this side of the line and that's good enough"

"Ain't nothing in this galaxy that's fair, furry. You wanna *keep* living to get that rep of yours, your best bet is to just come with me and cooperate. Tell the Principate you did this."

"Me? I'm pretty sure this shoddy ACE equipment went all by itself..." He flexed his fingers, palms up and out, like in a jazz band show. "*Boooooom*. Hehe."

"Alright, fine. You don't want to be *smart* here like you seemed, so be it. We'll do things the fun, bloody way. Can't say I didn't try nice—"

"How big of you—"

"—but now I'm going to break your frakking teeth until you do talk."

"Let's not," growled the alien, and quick as could be, snatched something off his belt and threw it before he spun and *ran*.

**"Frak!"** shrieked Satsi, as the flashbang blew and the world went white and sharp and silent and painful. A high-pitched screech filled her ears, muffling anything else, and she blinked back tears with a snarl. She charged blindly ahead, though unable to hear and barely able to see, just going off a vague impression of the shape of the corridor they'd been in. The woman slammed into a wall, but shoved off of it and kept going, fingers trailing the material to half-guide her until the spots started to clear from her vision.

She bundled past some other bodies, other workers rousing to the commotion of an unplanned detonation of any kind, but she ignored them or the sudden klaxons ringing. Red washed in and out of her vision, and not just from the warning lights. She smeared blood but not anger away from her eyes and kept running. The bastard pelted down a corridor ahead of her, his tall figure and ears making him visible even over other heads. Satsi shoved off a metal pipe, barely noticing the way her palms *peeled off*, seared to the steam-hot metal, and turned hard after him.

They spilled out into a maze of more piping, carts, and equipment. He seemed to know the area, and she was half-blind, following his shadow, his footsteps. She only had one thing going for her.

She was a lot frakking fitter.

The Zygerrian started to slow real soon, his breaths turned to gagging gasps, and she gained on him in an instant. The second she spotted an opening, when they emerged into a relatively cramped but mostly clear area next to some boilers, both pouring sweat, she leapt.

Her arms wrapped around his back and waist, and they crashed to the hot durasteel floor. He writhed, vibroknuckled-hand jerking out in an expert strike even as his leg lifted awkwardly for a kick, but he had no leverage and seemed to be a miserable ground-fighter. She rolled them over

easily, knocking his knee to the side and pinning it with her own, getting the other situated on the elbow that had struck for her and slamming it down at the wrong angle. There was a sick, slow sort of *snick-snap*, and the Zygerrian caterwauled. Not a break, like she'd hoped, but a torn ligament at least, probably.

Satsi didn't stop to test it. She lifted her fists. The spurs on his face gouged bloody holes in her knuckles, made pulp of her hands, but she didn't care. She just kept punching.

Only when approaching shouts and steps reached her over the sound of sirens did she jolt out of her bloodthirsty haze. The Zygerrian was red and purple, fur shining wet. Satsi swore and stood up, dragging him bodily behind one of the boilers and pressing herself there too. She waited until the miners passed before she hefted the alien onto her shoulders in a soldier's carry with a grunt of effort. No one would think this was a simple officer's arrest when she'd maimed the guy, so she'd have to sneak out. And she could hardly twitch a finger without agony lancing up her arms from her damaged hands.

What a frakking day.

-x-

Blazio was, to say, a tad miffed when she hauled ass into his office in broad daylight in front of his aides and various citizens and dragged an unconscious, cuffed, wounded man in with her, herself bloody and scraped.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" he whisper-shouted, which was really just shouting, as if it made anything better for him to try and seem sneaky now.

"You said you wanted a witness or an enemy, well, here. I'd bet anything he's the one who blew up that equipment at the mines, not any crap engineering. He practically admitted as much to me."

"Practically?" Blazio hissed, dough face gone purplish red in rage. Behind him, Amara Cirrus narrowed her blue eyes and didn't lower her blaster. Satsi had had armed security officers all but chasing her in here.

"Drop him and back away, then surrender your own weapons," Cirrus instructed, and Satsi scoffed, but did happily dump the man on Blazio's floor. She hoped the blood never came out of his pretty blue carpets.

"I'm working for him," she jerked her head at the governor, then gestured again at the Zygerrian with hastily bandaged hands. "Got you proof that these attacks weren't by the brotherhood. He's a saboteur from the Collective. Look, I get it. They're a possible enemy, they have *Jedi*. You

can't trust a confession they get out of this guy or anything they say. But interrogate him for yourselves and you'll see who's really behind this."

"Will we?" Amara's voice was icy. That blaster was ready to put holes in Satsi's skull.

"Cirrus," Blazio said slowly, considering. He looked from Satsi to the alien to his Security Chief. Satsi didn't let her confidence falter. Blazio was out for himself. He had to take the deal.

He had to, he had to because *she had to*—

"—have the man treated but imprisoned, and arrest this woman. I do say, your team, with my leadership, has done an excellent job capturing two terrorists."

*...what?*

"What?" Satsi echoed, numbly at first. Then— "WHAT?! BLAZIO, YOU FRAKKER, I'LL KILL—"

The stun bolts slammed into her and she kissed the floor before she could finish her threat. With ears and head ringing and her cheek pressed into the rugs just beside the Zygerrian's own pulverized face, it wasn't hard, at all, to see just how badly she'd screwed up in her desperation.

*Don't be impatient*, Lucine's voice seemed to mock in her head, while another, smaller voice answered her own question from a week earlier, the one that had been plaguing her endlessly, always nagging, always there, always reminding her *not safe, not safe, not safe*—

*Would she ever see Sammy again?*

*Yeah...goodluck with that.*