

Great Jedi War XIII, Phase I
Objective 2: Chiss For The Win

When it came to the monotony of her day-to-day work in social administration, Jacinta Ni'Erilia landed squarely on the administrative side of the equation. The young Chiss' presence among Lyra's colonists seemed to inspire more groans than cheer – a fact she could never understand given that all the data suggested her work was, in fact, improving their quality of life. Her colleagues insisted that the solution was to “smile more,” but the very suggestion made her blue skin crawl.

She had other talents. What she lacked in empathy, she made up in intellect, instinct and, occasionally, the strategic fire of a blaster bolt. Today, the latter had armed her with a piece of information that could turn the tide of this war and earn her the respect her talents deserved.

A fire burned beyond the usual glow of her red eyes as they wandered almost greedily over the sleek edges of the datapad in her hands. Its translucent screen had long since ceased broadcasting its secrets, and Jacinta had the sense to refrain from any further unskilled attempts at accessing its information. It didn't matter now; she had all she needed burned into a borderline photographic memory from the brief moments the screen sat decrypted in the rubble and chaos of Lyra's streets.

The Thuvis Shipyards must be taken. Inquisitorial agents report that the Collective is attempting to install an AI similar to the Technocratic Artifact recovered from the Meridian Station to establish full control of the shipyards for their own efforts.

Of course, the intelligence report alone was not enough to prove anything, particularly if the data could not be accessed again. If the report were true, it would explain the Collective's swift and enthusiastic efforts to defend the shipyards with an impressive display of military force in space and on the ground. It might also mean the attack itself – carried out apparently simultaneous to the strike on Lyra colony – had been the ruse the Brotherhood insisted it was.

But, if she was honest, the information had fallen into her hands a little too easily.

After the communications tower fell to the surprise attack, Jacinta's immediate concern became the colonists and scientists who were working underground at the ruins with members of the Brotherhood's Imperial Reclamation Service. When she finally arrived through the waves of colonists who were pouring, panicked, into the streets, she had been assured that the IRS personnel had already been detained and that the Collective had graciously offered to send reinforcements to aid in guarding the site from the Brotherhood. By the time the mine's small security force had convinced Jacinta that her talents and military background could be put to better use elsewhere, an explosion rocked the streets just outside the entrance to the ruins.

Jacinta had rushed forward to find a troop of men bearing Iron Legion insignias trampling the horrific aftermath of their comrade's suicide attack underfoot. She'd retreated to warn and join the Principate's security forces in what may well have been a futile effort had the Collective reinforcements not arrived on the heels of the Legion. That initial wave of Brotherhood troops moved together like a well-oiled machine, but none of them employed the wizardry of the second phase of the Brotherhood's attack. The Force-users also seemed to have no qualms with cutting down their less gifted "brethren" who got in the way.

One Force-user in particular caught the Chiss' attention – a Kiffar, judging by the green crescent tattoo across his face. The wild, red-haired Jedi stood out as a leader on the urban-esque battleground and did more damage with his gloved fists than most of his allies did with their lightsabers. Blaster bolts seemed to disintegrate before his face, and those who fired them from afar were dragged through the air to be pummeled with an almost vengeful ferocity. And yet, in the next moment, the juggernaut was using the same set of skills to pull one of his compatriots to safety behind an explosion-battered wall.

Intrigued and wary of a battle that blurred the lines of friend and foe by the moment, Jacinta withdrew from the fray and followed the Jedi. She found him crouched beside his fallen human friend, studying the datapad held weakly in the man's hand. Stealth was not one of her gifts, and Jacinta thought she felt the Kiffar's eyes on her briefly, but he had not reacted. When he did rise to his feet as the human breathed his last, his hazel eyes found their crimson mirrors too quickly. Not waiting to be dragged into the shockboxer's grasp by some unseen Force, Jacinta reacted as soon as she saw his golden-gloved hand lift, datapad in its grasp.

Thankfully, the red blaster bolt did not disintegrate into an invisible force field, but struck the powered glove high on the wrist, setting off a flurry of sparks and curses as the datapad fell face-up in the rubble. Jacinta prepared to aim her next blast at his dreadlocked head, but the Kiffar inexplicably fled after several long moments of hesitation spent with his eyes on the soft glow of the screen at his feet.

Jacinta had seized the opportunity, of course, but why had such a warrior fled after such minor damage to his glove? Why did he not attempt to retain such a valuable asset? Why did he not simply put the damned thing away as soon as he'd stood? It could have been a mistake; people make mistakes under stress. It also could have been an intentional ploy to leak information – or misinformation – for the Brotherhood's own interests.

The Chiss didn't yet have the facts to make that call. Common sense told her to keep an organization that called itself the *Dark Brotherhood* at arm's length, but the Collective, which had all too eagerly swept in to play the hero card, was a known threat that had already proven it was not to be taken at its word. The Triumvir of Oaths certainly didn't trust them, and neither would she.

The strands of this web were many, but the tactically minded Lieutenant Colonel was sure of one thing: this information was too important to trust to weaker minds.

Governor's Safe House

Lyra Colony – Eorilia's Moon

Lyra-3K-a System

37ABY

"Where is my Chief of Security?" Jar'deon Blazio inquired loudly of his significantly thinned staff of security personnel. "Has she not been assigned to my protection?"

"I'm certain she is seeing to that from a more strategic vantage point, sir." The officer did his level best not to sound patronizing. "You're perfectly safe here."

"Perfectly safe!" the Governor scoffed, sputtering a pastry remnant into the wide, open space of his so-called safe house. Its furnishings were spartan in comparison to his office, but what it lacked in luxury it made up in security and information. The floor-to-ceiling transparisteel display was replaced with screen after screen of data and updates on the crisis unfolding in the Lyra system. He'd tried to make sense of the information, but struggled to connect the dots. Most of what stood out to him were the holovids depicting various scenes of carnage – which, if he were honest, did more to inspire fear than any feeling of safety.

To be sure, it was the safety of the people of Lyra colony for which a governor should be concerned, but a stolen glance at his reflection in the nearest mirrored surface revealed he had still not regained his usual pallor, and his brow had taken to producing unsightly beads of sweat.

But, Blazio reminded himself as he turned his back on his security personnel to retrieve the cloth tucked neatly into his suit pocket, such was entirely unbecoming of a man of his stature.

He had made a grave error in judgment. He wasn't used to it and he didn't like it, but the fact remained. The deal he had hoped would catapult him to the next rung of success had turned like some nightmarish mirage into the deal that may end his career. Would he be held responsible for the lives that were lost?

No. He couldn't allow himself to think such things. It was that blasted Dark Brotherhood! They were the deceivers and the murderers. The *teeth* on that Damon Nix fellow should have been his first clue. Who smiles like that?

The governor shook off a shudder.

Perhaps his Chief of Security had it right. From what little Blazio understood of her history, Amara Cirrus had made her own share of mistakes, but now she was off making an opportunity of this madness. What stopped him from doing the same? The small matter of the perils that awaited outside his safe house, perhaps, but what choice did he have if he hoped to ever again return to the good graces of the Triumvirate? Perhaps this situation could be salvaged. Perhaps he was born for just such an occasion. Perhaps this was but a veiled opportunity for him to prove the value of his leadership once and for all!

Blazio's chest had just begun to swell with the breath of his own inspiration when an abrupt buzz cut through him like a vibroblade.

"...Lieutenant Colonel Jacinta Ni'Erlia, sir." The officer cleared his throat behind the cover of a closed fist, pretending not to notice that the governor had nearly left the ground in shock. "You requested to be briefed by someone from Social Administration."

After a quick swipe of his brow, the governor tucked the cloth neatly back into his suit pocket and made an about-face to greet his security-cleared guest. Was opportunity knocking at his door already?

"Ah, Lieutenant Colonel! What news from the colony?"

"What ... news?" The Chiss seemed either affronted or distracted. "I've come from the ruins beneath the colony. A suicide bomber shredded and dismembered civilians in the street before the first wave of their soldiers even arrived."

A wrinkle creased the flat, wide ridge of the governor's nose.

"Well, you're certainly to the point, aren't you?" Blazio murmured under his breath before lifting his tone to more audible levels. "How terrible. Horrific."

Jacinta watched the human squirm for the appropriate word to describe the unintended consequences of his own actions for a few moments before continuing. "The Collective sent their ... reinforcements ... on the Brotherhood's heels, but they were followed by another wave of Force users."

"Can you tell what they want with the ruins?"

"Knowledge? Treasure?" Jacinta shrugged, appearing eager to get on with matters surely more pressing than a façade of a gubernatorial briefing. "Their kind are always on the hunt for deep mysteries or ancient relics."

"But what did they stand to gain by an attack like that?" It was his turn to lace his words with affront, though the result bordered closer to disappointment. Hadn't he gone out of his way to open Lyra's doors to these potential allies? "We'd already

invited their treasure hunters freely into the ruins and even enlisted their aid in studying our findings.”

For a moment, even the governor could perceive a softening of the thinly-veiled disdain on the Chiss’ countenance.

“...You make a good point, Governor Blazio.” Jacinta hesitated.

“You look as though you want to say more, Lieutenant Colonel ...”

“I think I may know what they’re after.”

Blazio pulled a chair for his guest with a sweeping hand gesture. “Go on.”

Governor’s Shuttle
En route to Thuvis Imperial Shipyard
Lyra-3K-a System
37ABY

Jacinta had lied to the governor. It was a lie generously leavened with truth, and Blazio had devoured every sweet morsel. Of course, in a war of information, her lie might well turn out to be the truth. That was, after all, what made it the perfect bait.

She’d simply told Blazio that she’d intercepted intelligence which suggested that the *Brotherhood* was searching for an artifact similar to one they’d acquired from the Collective at Meridian Station and that they planned to use it to install some sort of AI system to seize control of the shipyard.

The governor’s instinct had been to rush into the ruins in an attempt to thwart the Brotherhood’s plan, but the Chiss had easily convinced the risk-adverse human that such an effort would be too little, too late. They’d be better off warning the shipyard and learning as much as they could about the artifact. If it was indeed similar to one stolen from the Collective, surely one of their number would be willing to assist them in acquiring information which might incriminate the Brotherhood.

They’d not informed the shipyard of their intent until after they’d left the governor’s safe house – much to the chagrin of his security personnel – yet they were now being personally escorted down to the Salvage Repair Station by Collective patrols.

Most of Jacinta’s work was done in the city at Lyra colony proper, but she was familiar with the work being done to repair the shipyards and had met many of the contractors and their families. The Severian Principate ensured their safety with routine patrols, but it was rare to meet one. Today, several dreadnaughts hung in the shipyard’s orbit, along with debris, ventilated sectors of the shipyard and more patrol flights than she could count. She also recognized elements of the Principate’s

5th fleet, but a battered, inert Ton-Talk-class Escort Carrier appeared to be all that was left of the Brotherhood's assault on the shipyard.

"It looks like we've made it in time!" The governor looked visibly relieved at the same observation. "I don't see many signs of the Brotherhood's fleet."

"Let's hope you're right," Jacinta acknowledged quietly, offering Blazio a thin, near-smile as she watched him pour through the notes on his datapad in preparation for his meeting with the Collective like a teenager cramming for an exam. His naïve optimism almost made her regret lying to the man.

Blazio had clearly struggled to accept he'd been wrong about a potential alliance with the Brotherhood and was now throwing himself into a full-on correction. Jacinta needed to cultivate that enthusiasm and overt disdain for the Brotherhood if her plan was to succeed, so she'd withheld more from the governor than just the truth of her intercepted message.

What mattered now, however, was how long she had to set the bait before the Brotherhood did arrive – for better or worse.

Salvage Repair Station
Thuvis Imperial Shipyard
Lyra-3K-a System
37ABY

"We're so pleased you've come to us with this information, Governor Blazio," spoke the silk tongue of Arhet Cetpek, the Capital Enterprise agent who had received the duo and their small team of security personnel into a small, makeshift office at the back of the Salvage Repair Station. "It shows remarkable foresight on your part. We've had some ... trouble convincing some of your friends on the Severian Principate that we are truly here to help."

"Foresight? If only." Though Blazio's chest swelled with pride, he elected to adopt a verbal tone more befitting his recent missteps. "If I had any foresight, I would not have attempted an alliance with such ... deceitful, murderous beasts."

"There, there. We all make ... mistakes." The Muun seemed pleased by the governor's description. "Now, Lieutenant Faer assures me that the Brotherhood's initial assault has been dealt with. We are maintaining a defensive position around the shipyard, and the Principate's 5th fleet has also arrived to provide their support if the Brotherhood should return. Our primary concern is with this artifact you mentioned. What can you tell us about it?"

“Well, that’s part of why we’re here, Agent Cetpek,” Blazio chuckled. “The message we intercepted only said that the artifact was similar to the Technocratic artifact the Brotherhood acquired at Meridian Station. For all we know, we could be carting it around in our cargo hold. We thought you might be able to tell us about the artifact the Brotherhood stole from you to give us some clues.”

Arhet sat back in his chair and steepled long, gangly fingers against pale lips. After a long pause, he shot a glance at Lieutenant Faer over his shoulder. “Fetch Sine.”

Once Faer was out of sight and on task, the Muun turned his elongated head to face Jacinta. “So, you say you came across this information near the ruins at Lyra colony after the attacks began? Tell me, what did you learn of the Force-users’ ways while you were there?”

“I learned many things, Agent Cetpek.” Jacinta knew what he was after, and she gave it to him. “But the most disturbing thing I observed was the Force-users cutting down their own men like animals when they got in their way.”

The Muun’s eyes narrowed somewhat at the description, but he nodded. “Yes, despicable behavior. Perhaps you are beginning to see why they are such a blight on society.”

“Quite.”

“Ahh, Wayv!” Arhet stood to his full height and gestured toward the man who entered the office ahead of Faer. “Governor, lady, this is Wayv Sine, one of our of chief engineers. I’m certain he can answer your questions.”

The governor stood next, dwarfing even the Muun as he turned to greet the new face. Sine appeared to be a thin, male Human – though he was nearing a ratio of organic to cybernetic that made Jacinta question her judgment.

“An honor to meet you, sir.” Blazio extended his meaty hand uncertainly toward the man’s less fleshy version of the same. “And ... ma’am?”

Arhet’s quick reply sounded flustered as he moved from behind his desk to join the others. “You’ll have to forgive Kabir, Governor. She is somewhat protective over information related to the artifact. She and her sisters had been tasked with its safety when it was taken from us. It and the man who understood it best.”

Blazio didn’t need the pointed, feigned empathetic glance to catch the Muun’s meaning. “No ... of course. We won’t pry.”

The Chiss saw her opportunity as she watched the governor wither under the stare of the yellow-tattooed Kiffar, who was herself the present object of Arhet’s ire. Still the only one yet to rise for the pleasantries, Jacinta pressed her fingers against the

desk as she stood, hooking her thumb under its ledge to deposit a small, translucent listener device before turning to face the equally socially awkward Sine.

“Is this it, then?” Jacinta asked of the image the engineer had already pulled up on the datapad’s display.

Grateful for the distraction, Blazio turned to find the object of the Chiss’ question. With a squint, a stoop and a single finger pointed at the image before him, the governor blurted, “Ah, this! I am so relieved!”

“Relieved?” inquired the sharp tone of the huntress.

“Yes! I saw a crystal that looked remarkably similar to this one in an early report from the colony’s ruins.” The governor positively glowed; his homework had paid off. “I’m relieved because the report said it had been moved offsite for examination. If the Brotherhood is looking for it in the ruins, they’ll never find it!”

Quick to command the governor’s attention so he did not notice the concerned glances of his comrades, the Muun lifted a gangly arm to put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “That’s excellent news, governor, but where have they taken it? Perhaps we could be of assistance in ensuring the Brotherhood does not ascertain the artifact’s location - or, if they do, in ensuring they do not leave with it.”

“Excuse me, Agent Cetpek,” Jacinta raised the volume of her voice to interrupt the reply that was already forming on Blazio’s lips. Moving to position herself between the two much taller men, she brushed the Muun’s arm away from the governor’s shoulder. “I’m sure you can understand why we would be hesitant to divulge that information.”

The Muun shot a warning glance at the tensing soldier and huntress who stood blocking the exit to the office before replying, “Of course, but you must understand how dangerous these Force-users are. If they should retrieve the artifact –”

“They won’t.” Jacinta cut him off. “We have confidence that the artifact is in a secure location, and we are confident that your forces and the Severian Principate have the shipyard well fortified should the Brotherhood arrive. You know what to look for.”

Arhet stiffened but relented, waving his hand to signal his comrades to make way.

“Very well, perhaps you should be on your way. If your information is correct, the Brotherhood may well be on their way already.”

Ignoring the governor’s stunned expression until they were outside of the office, but still within earshot of the huntress, Jacinta turned her head up to whisper, “We’ll get to it before the Brotherhood does.”

Governor's Shuttle
En route to [secure location]
Lyra-3K-a System
37ABY

"Governor, I've contacted the 5th Fleet," Jacinta said as she moved into a seat near one of the shuttle's data consoles. "They're going to see to it that the contractors and their families are safely transported from the shipyards."

Blazio tilted his head. "But that will thin their ranks. Don't you think they'll be safe with the Collective there to defend the shipyard?"

"No, Governor, I do not."

It was time. Jacinta leaned forward and slid a small data disk into the console. After a few moments of unintelligible noise as the Chiss searched for the right moment to begin playback, the recorded audio began with the sound of a slamming door.

"Follow them!"

"Right away, sir."

"Not you, Faer. Send the prisoners."

"The prisoners, sir?"

"...What if we should have to kill the Governor and his friend to retrieve the artifact? We can't have that on our hands. Send in Project Indigo, and we won't have to change our story. We'll kill the prisoners when they return to the shipyard with the artifact and look the hero."

"But my sisters are already en route to the research facility ..."

"Then they've obviously been duped – again. Make yourself useful and redirect them. 'Our' soldiers may need support. For your sake, I hope your sisters aren't recognized."

Jacinta stopped the recording and waited for the question she knew was coming.

"Are we being followed?!"

"I believe so, yes," the Chiss replied directly. "But it's doubtful they'll make any move until we arrive at our destination. They're hoping we're taking them directly to the artifact."

The governor could have cried, but instead he just kept talking. “But what will we do? I’ve failed, again! And now we’re headed to our deaths! Where *are* we going?”

“Failed? Governor! What are you saying? Don’t you see?” Jacinta tried on a smile for her unraveling companion.

“Wh– see what?” The man lifted his head from his cupped hands.

“You were right! All along! It’s clear now that the Collective has been framing the Brotherhood – had they not gotten involved, your deal would have come through!”

“Yes ... you’re right! I’m right!” Blazio stood to his feet in triumph before a look of panic took hold once more. “But ... what does that matter if the Collective kills us and takes the artifact, anyway?”

Jacinta shook her head, but she still wore that smile.

“Isn’t there a certain Chief of Security assigned to your protection?”

“Yes, Amara!” Blazio clenched his fist with renewed determination. “I know how to reach her! But what should I tell her?”

“Everything. Transmit the recording and the coordinates for our destination. Tell her to meet us there with every soldier she can muster.”

Sometime later

Lyra-3K-a System

37ABY

Of course, Jar’deon Blazio hadn’t told Amara *everything*. In fact, he had lied to his Chief of Security and to his superiors. But it was a lie so leavened with truth that it hardly mattered. He had simply told them that it was he who had the foresight to bug the Collective’s office over his suspicions that poor Jacinta Ni’Erilia had received false information framing the wrong organization. No harm would come to the girl in the lie. People make mistakes, but the Triumvirate was pleased to have someone of such intellect and instinct in leadership at Lyra colony.