“Ugh, why did I let her talk me into this?!” Erinyes groaned and slumped forward until her forehead thumped against her desk. The terminal in front of her had been consumed by one of her most hated enemies: spreadsheets, and all they represented. Banality. Tedium. *Work.* She hated the last one most of all, and she hated spreadsheets enough that even the usual quip about hate being fuel for a Sith didn’t seem funny.

“They’re just spreadsheets,” the Adept reminded herself as she ran her hands through her hair. “Sparky already did the hard part. It’s just annoying bantha kark. You can deal with annoying bantha kark–” A bleating from her office door interrupted her attempt at calm. “*What?!*”

The door slid open to reveal an imposing figure in dark armour, one of many who wandered the halls of the Taldryan Citadel. “Proconsul.” The figure entered the office and paced toward Erinyes’ desk. Once the door had closed behind him, he handed her a datacard. “Updated intelligence on the Collective fleet’s movements.” That was the extra context the Adept needed to recognise Battlemaster Nihlus Vexrii, newly-appointed Supreme Director of SRI.

Erinyes grunted something like a thank-you and plugged the datacard into her terminal. An entire Collective battle group sitting two hyperspace jumps away wouldn’t have made most people happy, but at least it was more interesting than budget reports. “You know, I could be smashed off my ass and getting naked with the most beautiful women on Zeltros right now.”

“Then why aren’t you?” The vocoder in Nihlus’ armour distorted his voice enough that Erinyes couldn’t tell whether the comment was sarcasm or a genuine question.

“Because the people who used to run this place are all dead or vanished into the ether, and it’s just my bad kriffing luck that the call for help came from a cute blonde woman instead of the Consul.” A beat passed with no response from Nihlus, and Erinyes looked up from the datapad, one eyebrow quirked. “You’re not big on facial expressions, are you?”

Nihlus considered the question, then withdrew his datapad from a pouch on his belt and tapped a few commands into it. A moment later, a holographic projection shimmered to life on the front of his helmet: a cartoonish icon of a Human face, the kind that people used in HoloNet messages, with a completely straight line for a mouth.

Erinyes’ raised eyebrow stayed firmly in place. “I didn’t know the position of SRI Director was dual-hatted with Clan Sassmaster.”

“Biask keeps nagging me to take initiative.” Nihlus tapped his datapad again, and the icon disappeared. “What was the other matter you wanted to discuss?”

“Follow me.” Erinyes rose from her chair and exited the office with the Battlemaster in tow. The corridors outside the Adept’s office were quiet, but the calm only lasted until she and Nihlus emerged from the lift in the security wing of the Taldryan Citadel. Here, the halls bustled with sapients of many different species, all wearing some variant of Taldryan’s military uniform. Every one of them greeted the Proconsul as she passed, and to Nihlus’ mild surprise, Erinyes returned each gesture.

Eventually, the two Sith arrived at Erinyes’ destination: a practice hall, not unlike the one at the Antei Combat Centre’s facility on Arx. A few pairs of soldiers practiced unarmed combat drills in the sparring area, but they all stopped and came to attention when they saw the Proconsul approach. “Clear the mats,” Erinyes ordered.

“You brought me here for a sparring match?” Once again, Nihlus’ vocoder wiped any inflection from his words.

“It’s my job to prepare the Clan for war, and I’m damn well going to have *some* fun while I do it.” Erinyes retrieved an elastic from a pocket and tied her hair back as she strode into the centre of the sparring area. “Besides, if these people are going to follow you in combat, they need to know what kind of person you are.”

Nihlus shrugged his shoulders to loosen them as he followed Erinyes into the ring. “The kind who won’t hesitate to make sacrifices to complete a mission.”

“Doesn’t sound like you want to lead them.” Erinyes glanced to the soldiers waiting around the perimeter of the mat. The younger ones’ faces were creased with worry at what the Battlemaster’s answer might be. The older ones already knew, and it showed in their resigned sighs and head-shakes.

This time, Nihlus’ shrug was a gesture of indifference as he reached for his lightsaber. “I don’t.”

“You know what? Neither do I, and if Shad, or Kir, or Ziggy, or Alanna, or Duga, or however many others you care to name were here, I would’ve told Cymbre to go jump out an airlock.” Erinyes’ twin violet blades sprang to life, and when she turned, Nihlus saw the Sith Elder that she kept hidden beneath the party-girl exterior. “And yet, here I am.”

“That’s not very Sith of you. I thought Rian was the altruistic one.” Nihlus’ crimson blade thrummed into existence, and he lowered it across his body as he drew one leg back.

“He is. I’m here because I know I have a much better chance of survival if Taldryan’s strong enough to fight against the Collective, and because I know Taldryan will fight harder if they know their leaders are looking out for them. So, now, you have a choice: help yourself by helping all of us, or die.”