“A full withdrawal to Elysia?” Consul Rian Taldrya grimaced at the operations plan on his datapad. “That’s the best Starr can come up with?”

“It’s not like we have many other options, now that we can’t take any offensive action without giving the Collective an excuse to roll in. Never mind that the only reason we’re in this mess is because C-Sec refused to arrest Eriston for sedition,” Erinyes said, the disgust plain in her tone.

Rian shook his head. “If C-Sec didn’t see any reason to arrest him, it’s not our place to question that.” He looked up when his response was met with a derisive snort. “We’ve been over this already, Erin. The Caelus government is a partner, not our puppet. We don’t give orders here like we did in Kr’Tal and Rybanloth.”

“You know what else we didn’t do in Kr’Tal and Rybanloth? Get besieged in our own home because our enemies were better at playing politics than we were.”

“Imposing our rule on others is what convinced people the Collective was necessary in the first place,” Rian said, frowning.

“And submitting to someone else’s rule is why the Collective now has a gun to our heads,” Erinyes shot back. “All because you wanted to be Ceyra Ky’Lian’s knight in shining armour. At least you’ll have plenty of time to spend together, now that she’s out of a job.” The Consul’s features darkened, and Erinyes didn’t need to be a mind-reader to know that she’d worn his temper thin. *Good,* she thought. *Maybe he’ll drop the “Grey Jedi” bantha kark and start being a* real *leader if he finally gives in to his anger.*

Before she could see the results of her prodding, though, a chime echoed through the office. Rian drew a sharp breath and gritted his teeth for a moment to regain his composure before he barked a response. “Come in.”

The door slid open to reveal the newly-appointed director of SRI, Battlemaster Nihlus Vexrii. “We’ve just uncovered a new Collective cell that evaded our initial sweep,” Nihlus said. “They seem to have a plot underway to blow up the Citadel. Their plans were already in motion by the time we discovered the cell.”

“Is it a credible threat? What intel do you have?” Rian asked.

“Nothing solid. Their communications discipline is better than we expected. Even saying it’s going to be a bomb is educated guesswork.”

Taldryan’s Consul scowled. “That isn’t helpful.”

“It’s going to take time to analyse the transmission logs, unless you care more about getting fast results than accurate ones.” Nihlus shrugged.

“Fine,” Rian sighed. “Have you coordinated with Vodo?”

“I tried. He wasn't answering his comlink.”

Erinyes pushed herself out of her chair quickly enough that Rian started upright and Nihlus took a step back out of reflex. “Send me the report. I’ll talk to him.”

“Sure.” Nihlus barely got the response out before the Adept was out the door.

Erinyes hardly noticed the Clan personnel who scrambled to get out of her path as she stalked back to her own office, gears turning in her mind. Luckily, Nihlus’ report had already arrived at her desk terminal by the time she sat down, and the Zeltron wasted no time in copying the file to a datacard. One urgent-flagged message later, she was out the door again.

On its best days, the Citadel’s observation lounge offered a spectacular view of the Taldryan Sector’s skyline at each sunrise and sunset. Unfortunately, today wasn’t one of those days; the sky was filled with thick bands of smog and punctuated by distant thunderheads, each one marking a downpour of acid rain. At least the counter-surveillance system into the lounge functioned regardless of the weather.

Erinyes had already been sitting and sipping from her flask of tsiraki for several interminable minutes before the Clan’s Spymaster, Vodo Biask Taldrya, arrived. “You wanted to see me?”

“Sit down.” Erinyes gestured to the chair across from her. “Nihlus thinks the Collective wants to blow up the Citadel.”

“Nihlus thinks a lot of things.” Servos whirred as Vodo’s oversized cybernetic legs compressed themselves enough for him to fit into the standard-sized chair.

Erinyes shook her head. “He has a reason this time.” Over the next few minutes, she related the events of her meeting with Rian and Nihlus.

“I’ll get people on it.” Vodo frowned slightly when no response came. “That *is* why you told me, right?”

“What do you think of Rian’s leadership?”

Vodo shrugged. “He’s kept the Clan together for years, no matter how things have gotten. Why?” A note of suspicion fell over the Twi’lek’s features.

Erinyes raised an eyebrow over her flask. “It’s been less than a year since you evicted the Ky’Lian Cartel and installed the Caelus Council in their place, and now, we’re one public protest away from having the Collective come in and Base Delta Zero us in our own home. Is that what you consider ‘effective leadership’ nowadays?”

“Yacks and Howie trusted Rian to lead the Clan,” Vodo pointed out.

“Yacks was already half-senile the first time *I* met him, and Howie is… well, he’s Howie. You can’t expect me to believe they would’ve been alright with what’s happening to Taldryan now, though, especially when the only reason we’re in this position is because Rian wanted to get into Ceyra Ky’Lian’s pants,” Erinyes protested.

Vodo smirked. “He was just trying to live up to your example, Erin.”

“Oh, shut up.” The Zeltron rolled her eyes. “At least I *know* I can’t be trusted to make decisions when there’s eye candy around. Rian doesn’t, and now we’re all paying the price. High Command’s latest plan, if that Collective battle group jumps into Caelus, is to draw them to Elysia and pray that the *Orthanc* can pin them all down long enough for the rest of the fleet to escape.”

“And how do you plan to fix that?” Vodo’s brow-ridges rose.

“The same way the Sith settled leadership disputes back in the old days.”

The Twi’lek narrowed his eyes, and for a moment, Erinyes could practically see him making calculations in his head. “What’s my silence worth to you?”

A flash of indignation rose in Erinyes’ throat. How *dare* this mere Equite try to extort *her*– but Vodo wasn’t just a “mere Equite”, she reminded herself. The difference in raw power between the highest tier of Equites and the lowest tier of Elders wasn’t so large that Erinyes could dismiss Vodo easily, and the Twi’lek had shown himself to be well-versed in dealing with unruly Elders anyway, having been both Consul of Taldryan and the Voice of the Brotherhood. Making an enemy out of Vodo would cause far more problems than it would solve, and they both knew it. In fact, Erinyes suspected that knowing he could get away with it was the only reason Vodo was asking.

“Besides the extra resources you gained when I handed you a chunk of OSI’s assets? I’ll owe you a favour.” At certain levels of the Brotherhood, favours were the only kind of currency worth having, and rare enough to only be called in in the most dire of circumstances. The fact that most Sith hated the idea of anyone having leverage over them only made the offer of it more powerful.

“Fine. Consider yourself ignored.” Vodo smirked, and Erinyes narrowed her eyes at him. He knew perfectly well that she hated not being at the centre of attention.

“This is the report Nihlus was trying to send you when you weren’t answering his calls.” Erinyes retrieved her datapad, tapped a few keys, then extracted a datacard and handed it to Vodo.

“I was wondering why he’d started sending me files marked ‘important intel’ again. When he was a Journeyman they were always full of bantha porn,” Vodo mused aloud.

The Zeltron raised a hand. “I’m not here to kink-shame. Just try to remember that he’s running SRI now, and that some of the files he sends actually *are* intel.”

Vodo snorted. “Why? If they are, you’ll just bring them to me instead. Anyway, I’ve got another meeting.” The Twi’lek offered Erinyes a cordial wave as he turned to leave.

“Have fun.” Erinyes watched him go, brow furrowed in thought. Vodo’s willful ignorance would prevent her budding coup from stopping before it started, but that left her with the issue of how to get the intel to the Collective in the first place—not to mention having an excuse to be absent when the bomb went off.

*No sense worrying about that until I know the bomb’s going to go off at all,* she thought. Taking another sip of tsiraki, the Adept started planning the best way to make contact with the Collective bombers.