

The Citadel
Selen
ABY 38

"I do not like this," Tali Sroka muttered as she walked up the pale grey stairs of the Citadel's grand entrance, the hem of her cream white silk dress rustling softly in the cool evening breeze. The scent of the ocean was never far away on Selen and the freshly trimmed hedgerows and decorative plants that lined the walkway added their own earthy tones to the olfactory ambiance.

"It is not a question of our likes or dislikes, Quaestor Sroka," the pallid Kaminoan replied laconically. "Your Consul requested your presence, and your station demands meeting these requests."

Tali shot Yumni Ha a dirty look, her long-standing annoyance at the alien's lack of intonation rearing its head once more. Despite the ash grey skin and spindly build, the Kaminoan trader had somehow managed to make herself look surprisingly presentable in a sleek black dress that straddled the line between conservative and stylish. The longer she spent looking at it, the more her eyes picked up small details here and there, tastefully subdued, but hinting at a rather expensive make.

"Andt you? Vhy are *you* here, then?" the Twi'lek asked pointedly.

"Oh, I enjoy the occasion," Yumni replied in her breathless monotone.

"The party?" Tali asked incredulously.

"No," the Kaminoan replied as bluntly as she was capable, "The occasion to strike new deals with the Severian Principate."

Tali let out a defeated sigh. "Of course you are," she muttered, before perking up. "Vouldt you mindt handling most of that tonight? I have *triedt* to vrap my headt aroundt all that, but it is still pure gibberish to me."

Yumni inclined her head minutely and looked down at the Quaestor with a look almost resembling surprise. "I'd thought you'd never ask."

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The grand hall was awash with pleasant, warm light, cast over the attending dignitaries by scores of hanging chandeliers and elaborate faux torches that lined the arched galleries. Reflecting off the polished floor of black basalt, the brilliant crystal chandeliers glittered with gold and silver, while the faux torches fluttered and roared in every color of the spectrum, each in their distinct quadrant.

The red quarter lay closest to the Serpent Throne, being the darkest of them all. There, shadowy Sith and the more unscrupulous businessmen rubbed shoulders and bided their time like venomous serpents in the Shadow Lady's lap.

Opposite, in the purple quarter, the loyal dignitaries of Dajorra mingled with their Severian counterparts; a gaggle of long-necked menials with impressive titles and little to no power behind them. In the middle, at opposite sides of the grand hall, lay the twin quarters of dark and light blue. There, the vast majority of the diplomats and high aristocrats met over mutual ground, exchanging pleasantries, knocking back the free drinks, and generally making nuisances of themselves to the overworked waiting staff.

Lastly, at the front of the grand hall and flanking its impressive entrance, were the yellow and green quarters. Dedicated to the junior members of the attending dignitaries and housing some of the more Jedi-leaning of the Arconans, these quarters were the most lively in spirit and mood, with the layers of meaning over each syllable increasing the closer one reached the Throne.

Tali and Yumni beheld the whole, taking in the throngs of finely dressed nobles, business elites, and various lords and lordlings who all vied for their next big score, or even a minute nudge up the cruel ladder of power that seemed to inevitably tilt towards the imposing basalt throne and its redheaded occupant.

The lady of the hour was wearing one of her emerald green gowns, cut just right to accent her natural curves without undermining the woman within. Tasteful pieces of fine jewelry glittered here and there whenever she tilted her head to acknowledge a dignitary or leaned an ear to the bespectacled Chiss doctor standing at her side. Her crimson locks, usually cascading down her alabaster shoulders, were now tied up high in a complex pattern of swirls that blossomed up behind her head into an imposing cluster of curls.

Next to her glamorous self, the Proconsul looked positively demure in his simple white tux with gold trim, combed back raven hair and a pair of extra shiny spectacles inlaid with Selenian mother-of-pearl. Despite the finely tailored cut of his suit, it still retained the utilitarian sensibilities that were the hallmark of the Chiss himself, and Tali had no doubt the jacket surely contained a concealed pocket for a scalpel, or three.

Several Principate delegates, easily identifiable by their matching broaches, were scattered around the colorful quadrants, mingling effortlessly with their Arconan counterparts. Although the aire was pleasant, ringing with laughter, boisterous murmurs, and soft jizz, Tali could sense a deep undercurrent of unease lingering beneath the collective facade. And at the center of this unease lay the Throne itself.

"Ve shouldt go andt introduce ourselves to our host," Tali stated with a hushed tone, though Yumni made no acknowledgement of her obvious tip. Instead, the Kaminoan strode forward with purpose, leaving the Twi'lek scrambling to keep up. In all too few steps to Tali's liking, the trader

had crossed the grand hall and approached the Serpent Throne to incline her head at the redheaded Consul.

"I am delighted to attend your tremendous event on behalf of the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Company. This night will be remembered as the fruitful beginning of a prosperous relationship with the Severians." Yumni's voice lacked any inflection to drive the message home, though perhaps precisely that made it genuine.

Lucine Vasano said nothing in reply, lips pressed into the faintest of polite curves that spoke of innate breeding. She instead turned towards the Quaestor who'd only just caught up.

"On behalf of Port Ol'val, I am pleased to attend this event, my Consul. I am sure every guest will be more than impressed by the display," Tali delivered the line she'd tried to hone to be as flattering as she could stomach.

Lucine raised an eyebrow, imperceptibly so, but said nothing about her stilted sycophantry.

"Be welcome, both, to the Citadel and my halls. Enjoy the festivities and serve Arcona as you've done in the past, *darlings*." There was an emphasis on the last word which sent shivers down the Twi'lek's spine, but she showed nothing. If the Kaminoan had noticed the same, her expressionless demeanor betrayed nothing, as usual.

Rhylance gestured silently that they both were excused like the good little henchman he was pretending to be and the pair left to partake in their own roles. As ostensibly an envoy for the '*Blind Man*', Tali had to sniff out her opposite number among the crowd and establish a connection within the Principate, while the Kaminoan was here purely for her own sake.

"Well then, I bid you a fruitful evening, Miss Sroka," Yumni offered as they made their way towards the blue sectors at the center of the grand hall.

"Likewise," the Twi'lek replied with a curt nod, before taking in the magnitude of the task before her. The gala was crowded to say the least, and the number of Severian delegates was *intimidating*. But, she consoled herself, at least she had a very particular set of skills at her disposal that should help her with finding the elusive target. She just hoped that would be the hard part.

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Finding the delegate had definitely been the easy part.

The Zabrak woman was stocky but lithe, dressed in a gown that reminded Tali eerily of Satsi's choice in fashion; *minimal*. She'd yet to learn her name, though through her broken Basic it was difficult to tell whether one of the mangled syllables had been it. The woman seemed inebriated,

drinking greedily from a colorful flute in long, slurping strawfuls. It probably wasn't *helping* her pronunciation.

"So, as I was saying..." Tali began, seemingly for the seventh time, "Ve might have some *mutual* interests in finding *alternative* markets for some *special* goods." She gave the woman a hopeful glance.

Sluurp!

The Zabrak woman finished her drink just as a waiter passed by. The woman deftly plucked another glass off his tray while placing her emptied one in its place with a skill that belied her state of inebriation. Turning to face Tali once more, she waited a moment more to see if she'd stopped speaking and then, very laboriously and with obvious pains to twist her mouth into the correct positions, gave her reply in broken Basic.

"Me no jynderstjynd," she stated with great effort, each grating syllable dragging out like pulling teeth off a bantha.

Tali tried to mask the sigh of exasperation as she ran a hand over her lekku and hoped Yumni was faring any better in the green quarter.

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"No," the obstinate Dug replied bluntly, averting his disinterested gaze from the towering Kaminoan standing before him.

Yumni was silent for a moment, about as strong a flustered reaction one was ever going to get out of her, before trying again.

"But surely you must see the benefit in fuel costs alone if—"

"No."

Another pause.

"Perhaps if the Principate's excess durasteel production could be—"

"No."

A long pause.

"I am ready to offer *most generous* rates—"

“No.” The Dug had stopped even looking at her by now, instead idly swirling the dregs of an expensive spirit in one hand while seemingly enjoying the view among skirt hems that his diminutive stature afforded him. One of the only perks of his size.

Yumni Ha was rarely at her wits end, but facing such a stonewalling was definitely having an effect on her particular brand of lukewarm bravado. She’d been trying for the better part of twenty minutes to get the Dug to agree on at least *something* or even list his desires for a future trading relationship with Dajorra, but it seemed like he almost deliberately wanted nothing more than to waste the Consul’s credits by downing the most expensive liquor in the Citadel.

She couldn’t place her wiry finger on it, but there was something she was missing. Perhaps the Quaestor could offer her insight, she did possess a far better understanding about the nuances of various creatures’ motivations that extended beyond the material.

“I shall return,” Yumni stated with a polite bow.

“Please don’t,” the surly Dug replied as he finished his drink and began searching for another.

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“**Pardon, my lady, miss Sroka,**” Stres’tron’gramis interrupted the non-discussion between the indulgent Zabrak and the increasingly frustrated Twi’lek with a nod at each.

Both women turned towards the towering Chiss who’d dressed up for the occasion in his finest midnight black suit with crimson trim. Not exactly a massive thematic upgrade from his usual outfits of choice, granted, but an undeniably stylish one at that.

“**A delightful occasion, made doubly so by your presence,**” he thundered on in his booming voice.

Both women looked a bit taken aback by the comment and gave him looks as to inquire *whom* he’d meant. The Chiss, for his part, realized the misstep and gave his best attempt at a significant look at both, simultaneously. The effect was *acceptable*.

“Lovely to see you as vell, Strong,” Tali said with a polite smile, relieved if only to have someone who could speak Basic to converse with. “Enjoying your time?”

“**Indeed, miss Sroka, a most wondrous evening with breathtaking people attending! I am sure the union between Arcona and the Principate will cherish this as a cornerstone for decades to come.**”

Tali cleared her throat and cast an anxious look at the Zabrak who seemed confused and mildly entertained by the mountainous Chiss' rumblings.

"Umm, yes. I'm sure that will be the case," Tali muttered. "Say, would you like to help me find some refreshments?"

"Why of course! Although, I am sure ample refreshments of all kinds may be acquired from the attending wait staff at your convenience. Here, let me flag one down for you!"

Strong was already half-waving at a nearby valet when Tali swiftly pulled his hand down by the forearm.

"That's very kind of you, but I was looking for a *particular* sort of refreshment that *requires* us to search for it," she stated as poignantly as she dared without insulting her opposite number.

The Zabrak seemed thoroughly disinterested.

"Oooh!" Strong grunted as realization dawned. **"Of course, miss Sroka. Let me escort you."** He propped his arm for her to take and the pair gave their swift goodbyes to the Severian who replied with an awkward grunt of what, presumably, was Basic.

Once out of earshot, Tali slumped against the Chiss' broad arm and sighed.

"It's *hopeless*," she pined, "I cannot make heads or tails with that woman. She can barely *speak*."

"Oh, um, yes. I did pick up on a faint accent in her farewell," Strong murmured in agreement, **"Perhaps a tad more pronounced than your own."**

Tali looked up at him with a confused and slightly insulted expression.

"I have an accent?"

The Chiss' ears suddenly took on a shade not too far from his crimson eyes as he began to choke and murmur some sort of recovery. It was mercifully cut short as Yumni fled over and made her presence known.

"Miss Sroka, I require your assistance."

Still a bit confused by Strong's comment, but focusing on the more pressing issue before—and slightly above—her Tali craned her neck to look the Kaminoan in the eye.

"What can I help you with? Aren't you supposed to be the master of trade talks?" There was the slightest hint of ire in her tone, the Twi'lek taking a petty jab at the emotionless Kaminoan's seemingly flawless track record out of sheer frustration.

"And that still remains the case," Yumni replied, oblivious to any slight, "However, before my esteemed counterpart deigns to engage in discussion, I cannot say to have even tried."

Tali blinked.

"He's not talking to you?"

"No."

"At all?"

"He is *talking*, but not discoursing."

"That sounds *rude*. Why is he like that?"

"I was hoping you might be able to figure it out, miss Sroka. You seem far more adept at uncovering such things."

The compliment felt strange, but not unwelcome.

"Indeed she is!" Strong agreed readily. **"If anyone can find out what his hang-up is, it is mistress Tali."**

Tali felt her cheeks burn for a moment at the high praise, spoken far too loudly for her liking. Sometimes she wished the Chiss could use his indoor voice, though the words themselves were quite pleasing to the earcones.

"I will see what I can do," she agreed with a nod.

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"Hmm," Tali murmured as she observed the surly Dug going through another glass of expensive golden liquor. She'd taken up a vantage point some discrete distance away from him, ostensibly making smalltalk with Strong whilst peering past his shoulder at the Severian merchant.

"I think I have an idea," she stated pensively, "But just to be sure..."

She closed her eyes momentarily, letting her presence flit onto the misty plains of the Force. Cool clouds surrounded her, chilling to the touch, but upon parting them a cacophony of color

and sensation opened beneath. Resentful reds, stoic blues, energetic yellows and vibrant greens pulsed and swirled in a kaleidoscope around her, bewildering to behold. She had to take a step back and observe it all from a distance, so smothering was the turmoil of strong presences around her.

As she pulled back towards the mist and gained some perspective, a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. Now seeing the full gamut of Force attuned emotion within the grand hall, Tali could not help but admire the seeming foresight that had gone into the colored sectors in the physical world. The attending guests seemed to match their intended areas almost flawlessly with only the borders seeing spirited mingling.

All, except one spot of seething red resentment in the ocean of calm blue, the Dug, and a spot of green in a sea of red occasionally joined by others of green, yellow, and blue.

She reached out to lightly touch both auras with her mind, assessing their flavor and source. It verified her suspicions.

Tali opened her eyes into the real world, the noise of the party coming crashing down on her like a tidal wave. She stumbled, momentarily, but even in that split second Strong had caught her and kept her standing with a gentle arm.

"I know what bothers him," Tali stated elatedly, "And I know how we could fix it."

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"I do not believe I caught your name last time around," Yumni Ha said with breathless decorum.

The surly Dug deigned her worthy of only a half-glance before returning to his drink.

"Doesn't matter," he grunted. "You won't get any use of it anyhow."

Yumni nodded, but continued. "My name is Yumni Ha, and I work for Tali Sroka."

"Good for you, now please leave. You're wasting your time."

"I may not know who you are, master Dug, but I know you work for master Dyla."

The Dug turned his head towards the Kaminoan with narrowed eyes. It seemed to have provoked a reaction.

"Tell me, is it not Dyla who is over there, exchanging empty pleasantries with Proconsul Rhyllance, and stalwartly ignoring the finest advances of lady Vasano?" she continued.

The Dug did not need to look to know.

“Master Dyla is a rather handsome man, for a Togruta, is he not? Although I must admit I do not know much of such things. Still, it seems he’s more than happy to entertain parts of his entourage from time to time so far, but I’ve not seen him entertain you...”

That seemed to strike a nerve. He grumbled tersely. “What are you getting at, woman?”

“I believe that he does not value your contributions here quite as much as those of your peers,” Yumni stated ever bluntly. “Why is that?”

The Dug gave her a murderous look and appeared ready to try and jump up to choke the Kaminoan right then and there, but instead his shoulders slumped and he let out a defeated curse in his native tongue.

“Perceptive,” he admitted. “He’s doling out favors to those closest to him, but a lowly merchant like me is never getting his attention. Not even if I struck the deal of the century.”

Yumni felt like arguing that enticing proposition, but pressed on with the information Tali had shared. “Perhaps there is another explanation,” she suggested.

The Dug raised a quizzical eyebrow, momentarily forgetting his interest in the expensive drink in his hand.

“The people he is meeting are offering him as much as he is offering them,” Yumni explained. “He feels beholden to entertain the Consul, but it is clear he dislikes being there, surrounded by the gloomy cadre of our *sombre* practitioners.”

“You’re saying, he converses with them to escape the need to talk to your superiors?”

“Perhaps not in those words, but yes. He is a gentle man, is he not? Risen to his station by merit, as most do in the Principate? He likely feels *overwhelmed* by the depth of political play going on around him.”

The Dug rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What do you propose?”

“About his situation?”

“Yes.” For the first time during the entire evening, the Kaminoan finally commanded the Dug’s undivided attention.

“Well,” Yumni stated softly, “I suggest we give you an excuse to go meet him, and ask him over here to give his blessing to our trade deal.”

The Dug's dour expression melted into an amused smile as he considered the proposal. A moment later, he stuck out one of his hands.

"Pizba," he said with a half chuckle. "The name's Pizba. Figured you'd need to know whom you'll be negotiating with."

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Tali leaned against the bar and swirled a cocktail skewer in an almost untouched glass of neon green liquid. Strong sat beside her, looking worried, and nursing a dark drink of his own. It was decidedly *less* untouched.

"Miss Sroka, I am sure miss Ha is perfectly capable of handling the situation without our superv—"

"Shush!" Tali hissed suddenly, perking up as she saw the Kaminoan shake the Dug's hand in an amicable manner. He broke off towards the Throne while she headed towards them. Tali felt her excitement grow as the tall woman traversed the dance floor, avoiding several swirling guests, and made her way to their side.

"Excellent news," Yumni Ha declared as she took a seat beside them and ordered a tall beer. "I've managed to secure us a rather lucrative deal, if I may say so myself. Gratitude, for your invaluable assistance, miss Sroka."

Tali smiled from ear to ear. "Fantastic! At least the night wasn't a complete bust."

"Complete...? How so?" the Kaminoan inquired and took a long sip of her lightly frothing drink.

"The Zabrak, I just couldn't get through to her," Tali sighed.

"She had a bit of an accent," Strong helpfully added.

"Oh? Even stronger than yours, miss Sroka?"

"Why does everyone keep telling me I have an accent?!" Tali said with distinct annoyance.

The Chiss and Kaminoan exchanged a look, but neither said a further word on the matter.

"Have you tried Huttese?" Yumni suggested.

"What?"

"Huttese, the language of the Hutts."

"I know what Huttese is, Yumni. But why would that help?"

"It is a significant trade language, and one which someone as well connected as she must surely know. Doubly so as the Hutts are a major source of *alternative trade* right next to the Severian Principate," she took another sip.

Tali stared at her blankly.

"She surely would have suggested it..." she began, though doubt began gnawing at her. She turned to look at Strong for support in either direction. He shrugged his impressive shoulders, mimicking a minor landslide.

"I suppose it's worth a shot..."

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The Zabrak was looking surprisingly sober by the time Tali and Strong returned to her. Upon seeing their return, she offered them both an awkward wave and a greeting in broken Basic.

Now more attuned to the presences around her, Tali could sense the waves of discomfort, though cunningly masked, emanating from her as she struggled to form the words. Had Yumni been onto something?

She bowed politely and began in Basic.

"Apologies for leaving so abruptly. Some urgent business came up, I hope you understand," she said. "It also occurred to me, whether you would prefer to talk in some other language? I do not know Zabraki, but my Huttese is not terrible." She paused, before continuing in that language. "*If you prefer it?*"

The Zabrak looked shocked, taken aback when she heard Tali speak in fairly serviceable Huttese. Her cheeks flashed a hue of red beneath the pastel pink, before replying in smooth Huttese as well.

"Apologies, miss Sroka. I had read your file and, knowing your personal history with the Hutts, I'd figured it might be rude to talk in their language. I perhaps should have hired a translator, or learned better Basic."

Tali blinked, twice, struggling to keep her jaw from hitting the floor as the reasons for her troubles were laid out so plainly before her.

"I am flattered by your concern, but I assure you, my past has no control over me, or my choice of language," she lied.

"Flattered," the Zabrak corrected with a hint of amusement. "The word you were looking for was Flattered."

Tali felt her earcones burning as she mumbled an apology. *"Perhaps my Huttese isn't quite as good as I thought. I would still be delighted to discuss matters with you, at least to establish further contact in the future."*

"I'd like that," replied the Zabrak with a smile.

"Oh, I don't think I caught your name, miss...?"

"No? I said it many times. My name is Miinu. Is my accent truly that thick?"

Miinu? Me-no...

Tali felt like slapping herself in the face with her own lek.

"N-no, of course not. I was just, forgetful..." Tali sighed, much to the Zabrak's amusement.

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The pair had not had much time to talk, but having found a common tongue, things had at least progressed. The two women had concluded their meeting with a promise for another in the future and the prospect of sharing some trivial tokens of trust regarding the Collective's movements in their respective areas.

As the evening began drawing to a close, the final dance was called and Tali found herself accosted by the burly Chiss who'd so patiently spent his evening in her presence. She hardly had the heart to say no and soon enough the two were dancing under the baleful gaze of the Shadow Lady and her emotionless aide.

Tali could sense the well-hidden resentment from the red headed Human, but paid it no mind for now. She was sure no matter what she did, there would be no avoiding her future ire, even with her and Yumni's missions completed.

From the corner of her eye, she caught Miinu twirling with Sera and Karran in some peculiar dance of Zabrak origin. It looked wild and savage, but fit oddly well with the tempo of the music that guided her own feet.

Wait, had she mentioned to either of those two that Miinu was effectively a foreign intelligence agent? She *had* just admitted knowing rather intimate details about *her* past. Details Tali had not thought to have travelled even outside Ol'val...

A dread surmise tightened in the back of her neck as her motions grew stilted, barely paying attention to the music and instead peering intently at the trio of Zabraks and what Miinu might be trying to glean from them.

"Do not worry, miss Sroka," Strong whispered, sensing her distress. "They are quite capable individuals, both Captain Val'teo and Miss Kaern. You even trained half of the two," he added with a hint of amusement.

"I guess you're right," Tali sighed, tearing her gaze away as the music filtered back into her consciousness and her step lightened. "I shouldt trust them."

"Not only that, but you have earned yourself a moment's relaxation," he murmured softly. "It is a party, after all."

Tali considered his words as their fleeting steps carried them across the floor in swaying, elegant patterns, lulling them into the dulcet tunes of the intoxicating melody. Letting her shoulders relax, Tali let out a calming breath and pressed her cheek gently against Strong's shoulder.

I like this. She decided as they danced the night away.