“Erinyes, it’s Vodo. Are you letting us in or not?”

The Adept blinked and looked up at her office door. “You didn’t ring the bell.”

“Yes, we did. Three times in the last five minutes.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been here for half an hour already, and I didn’t hear anything.” Granted, the first twenty minutes of that had been in a stupor while she waited for her caf to finish brewing, but she’d woken up enough since then that she would’ve heard *something*.

“Where’s ‘here’?”

“My office! Where the kriff do you *think* I’d–” The Adept stopped short as the problem finally clicked, and she sighed. “I’ll be right there.”

Erinyes didn’t hear what Vodo said before the transmission ended; she was too busy grumbling under her breath as she gathered her cup of caf, her datapad, and a few other sundries, then stalked out of the office. The caf was mostly gone by the time she emerged from the elevator, in plain view of two figures standing outside an opulent door: the Consul’s office. Her *new* office, not the old Proconsul’s office she’d sauntered into by force of drowsiness and habit.

“Shut up,” she growled, before either man had a chance to say anything. The half-robotic Twi’lek sneered, and Nihlus’ mask was as expressionless as ever. They were already standing far enough apart that Erinyes didn’t have to squeeze between them to open the door. *At least this chair is comfier,* Erinyes thought as she settled behind the desk. Maybe it was a good thing she’d gone to the wrong office; if she’d sat in *this* chair before she’d had caf, she reflected, she might’ve fallen asleep. “Alright, let’s get started.”

“Rian contacted us two days ago, asking for information on a group called the Patriots’ League,” Vodo said, still towering over the desk. “They’re one of several anti-Taldryan organisations that cropped up when we first moved into the system and ousted the crime lord running the place. They went quiet after a few months, but Rian says the Patriots have been holding protests at Community Outreach events since the Collective came through.”

Erinyes went to take a sip of her caf, then frowned into the empty cup. “Sparky, can you make another pot, please?” The astromech droid in the office’s rear corner—who *also* hadn’t warned her she was in the wrong office, the little kark—bleeped an affirmative, and Erinyes turned her attention back to Vodo and Nihlus. “What’d you find on them? Rian must have had good reason to ask you. We all know he’s big on not doing anything that wouldn’t pass muster with Caelus Security.”

“He’s also cautious, and he knows that whether or not we follow Caelus Security’s rules isn’t his decision anymore,” Nihlus said. “In any case, he also sent us some scans he took at the most recent protest. Our analysis hasn’t picked up anything out of the ordinary so far, but we’re monitoring the comm signals Rian detected to see if they lead anywhere interesting.”

“My people are reaching out to their contacts. If the Patriots’ League is organising, someone will know,” Vodo added.

Nihlus crossed his arms as he shifted in his chair. “The better question is what we’re going to do about it. Normally we share intel on potential terrorist threats with C-Sec and let them deal with it, but so far, we don’t have anything that would convince them to act.”

“Then don’t tell them anything. Sharing intel now just gives them a chance to leak it and warn this ‘Patriots’ League’ that we’re on to them.” Erinyes had been trying to distance Taldryan’s military from Caelus Security ever since the entire Caelan fleet defected to the Collective. Rian had assured her that the remaining C-Sec personnel were loyal to the Chancellor and Taldryan, but Erinyes hadn’t survived this long as a Sith by giving trust too freely.

“Very well. If we’re finished here, I’ve got another meeting.” Nihlus started to rise from his chair.

“Let me know what you find.” Erinyes waved the two men off as Sparky presented her with another cup of caf. She couldn’t help but smirk to herself when she saw Vodo turn to catch up with Nihlus in an impromptu race-walk, then activated her desk terminal as they departed.

A few hours later, under a mountain of datawork, Erinyes was far less inclined to smile. Even with Sparky helping her through it, reviewing the sheer volume of administrative reports that her new job required was dreadfully boring. She’d just thumped her head against her desk for the fourth or fifth time that afternoon when her terminal notified her of an incoming call. “Yes?”

Nihlus’ voice came through the speakers. “We got a hit on one of the comm signals that Rian picked up. The owner had a very interesting call with a former associate of Drayen Ky’Lian’s who goes by Natalis. They’re holding some kind of meeting tomorrow night.”

“Drayen Ky'Lian? I feel like I should know that name.”

“He’s dead now, but he was the head of the Caelus Cartel before we arrived and threw them out. The current Chancellor is his sister,” Nihlus explained.

Erinyes frowned. “So, the Patriots’ League is meeting with someone who has a reason to hate us and the connections to turn them into a real threat. That sounds like a good enough reason to pay them a visit.”

“I’ve already contacted Caelus Security about that–”

“What? I told you *not* to involve them,” Erinyes said, irritation in her voice.

“– because I knew they would say they can’t arrest someone just for talking with a former criminal. So if the Caelus Council throws a fit, you can tell them that we tried to take it to them and were brushed off,” the Battlelord finished.

Erinyes went sheepishly silent for a beat. “Oh. Thanks.” Nihlus signed off, and Erinyes punched another button on her terminal. “Tell Colonel Saviri he’s got a new tasking for tomorrow night, and that SRI will provide the time and location.”

Oh-dark-thirty was a time that Erinyes saw more often than most, but this time, she was unusually sober. It was time for the Dark Fire Brigade’s raid on the terrorist group that was targeting Taldryan, and she’d insisted on being there in person.

“Sav. You look… normal.” As she climbed off her swoop, Erinyes smirked at the Special Missions officer, who was—for once—dressed entirely in civilian clothing, with no weapons in sight.

“Consul.” Lieutenant-Colonel Marcus Saviri offered a nod in place coming to attention and saluting. “My teams will be in position once we’ve confirmed the sightlines are clear. Best not to let any of the locals see these.” He jerked a thumb toward the crates of blasters and energised riot shields in the rear of the speeder van.

Erinyes nodded. “Very good. What’s inside?”

“No visuals. Scans show four military-aged Human males and three military-aged Human females, with three detectable blaster weapons between them; power outputs are in the range of heavy pistols. No explosives that we were able to detect from out here.” In an era where scan-shielded compartments existed, Saviri knew better than to say that those were the only weapons inside the building.

“And what’s the plan?”

The commando retrieved a handheld holoprojector and activated it, displaying a blueprint with two highlighted entrances. “The doors are on the south and east sides of the building. Aurek and Besh will breach from those entrances. Cresh and Dorn are stationed around the perimeter in case any of the suspects try to escape.”

“You’re not trying to count me out, are you?” Erinyes quirked an eyebrow.

Saviri chuckled and pointed to a corner at the opposite end of the building from the two highlighted entrances. “I know you prefer to lead the assault elements, but I suggest you infiltrate through one of the windows near the northwest corner of the building. The suspects will probably try to flee in that direction, and it’ll be easier for you to get into position to stop them without being noticed.” The lieutenant-colonel knew that there was no point in trying to dissuade Erinyes from joining the assault, but it was still his job to keep her alive, and putting her off in a corner somewhere was the best compromise he could manage.

“If you insist.” Erinyes rolled her eyes, knowing full well that Saviri didn’t want her in the line of fire; they’d been playing this game ever since she was appointed Proconsul. “I’ll enter the building just before you order the breach. If they do hear me coming, they’ll be looking the wrong way when the boys kick the door in.”

“Acknowledged.” With that decided, Erinyes left Saviri to his preparations and set off around the outside of the building. The area that Saviri had chosen for her to breach from was an alleyway with no obvious foot traffic, but the Adept still made a point of staying in some kind of cover when she could, whether in a doorway or behind an industrial-sized garbage bin.

Luckily, Erinyes didn’t have to wait long before the Dark Fire Brigade commandos signalled that they were ready to begin the operation. When the time came, Erinyes ignited one of her lightsabers and cut the nearest ground-floor window pane free of its sill. A touch of the Force ensured that the now-loose panel settled gently on to the ground instead of crashing and drawing attention. One graceful swing later, Erinyes heard voices from the other side of the building as she took cover behind a nearby shelving unit, and double-clicked her comlink to notify Saviri that she was ready.

“*Three… two… one… execute, execute, execute!*” Between the first and second orders, two nearly-simultaneous *cracks* issued from the far side of the building as the Dark Fire Brigade’s battering rams knocked their respective doors off their hinges. After the third, Erinyes heard footsteps scramble in her direction, then the high-pitched whine of the commandos’ C-10 stun grenades going off inside the room.

When she was confident that the stun wave had passed, Erinyes stepped around the corner, and her eyebrows shot up when she saw two of the Patriots’ League members charging towards her at full speed. One of the Patriots had a blaster pistol in hand—one with a fully-automatic fire mode, as Erinyes discovered when she deflected the first shot with her lightsaber, but was forced to duck back around the corner to avoid the four that followed it. The suppressive fire bought the unarmed Patriot enough time to dash for the window Erinyes had opened and launch himself into the air in a desperate bid to escape.

At least, it would’ve, if the Adept hadn’t reached out and drawn on the Force to stop the man mid-flight. Instead, with a flick of Erinyes’ wrist, the Patriot’s motion abruptly reversed and sent him sailing into his armed comrade, knocking them both to the floor in a mess of tangled limbs. As the conspirators tried to right themselves, Erinyes drew her Bryar pistol with her free hand and toggled it to its stun setting. In the same moment she pulled the trigger, a trio of Dark Fire Brigade commandos with blaster pistols and riot shields burst into the hallway and did the same, and the Patriots promptly collapsed under the barrage of glowing blue rings.

Erinyes looked up to the commandos as she deactivated her lightsaber. “What the kriff happened?” Being shot at didn’t bother her, but the possibility that someone had botched their job—whether the Dark Fire Brigade assaulters or the ordnance technicians who were supposed to make sure the grenades weren’t duds—certainly did.

One of the commandos, a senior NCO by the way she waved at the other two to secure the fallen Patriots, came to attention. “We don’t know, ma’am. We’re certain we weren’t spotted, but these two dropped for cover at exactly the same time we breached, almost like how you Sith sense danger before it happens. They were already halfway out the door by the time we entered,” the NCO said, face flushed with embarrassment.

It took Erinyes a moment to bite back her irritation before she spoke again. “Well, don’t worry about it. The perimeter teams would’ve caught them if I hadn’t.” The Dark Fire Brigade commandos were the best in the Taldryan army—that was why they were the Summit’s bodyguards—but even they weren’t perfect, the Adept reminded herself. ”As you were.” The NCO nodded, relieved to be free of Erinyes’ scrutiny, and went to escort her comrades as they carried the two unconscious Patriots away.

Meanwhile, the Adept keyed her commlink. “Vodo, it’s Erinyes. You’re about to have guests.”

Erinyes had barely gotten back to her desk when her terminal lit up with an incoming message. “Consul, it’s the com centre. You have a call from Chancellor Ky’Lian.”

“What, did she forget that Rian isn’t here anymore?” The Adept frowned and took a slug of tsiraki from her hip flask.

“She asked for you by name, ma’am.”

*Well,* that’s *not a good sign,* Erinyes thought, sighing. “Send her through.” A moment later, the Taldryan logo on the desktop terminal was replaced with an image of Ceyra Ky’Lian. “What can I do for you, Chancellor?”

“You can help me help you prevent the Collective from getting enough support to make another attempt at taking over the Caelus System,” Chancellor Ky’Lian said, voice smooth as silk.

“First we get reports that an anti-Taldryan organisation is plotting an attack against us, now you come to me, asking me to help keep the Collective out. I’m starting to think we weren’t thorough enough in eradicating them the first time.” The Adept took another slug from her flask.

Ky’Lian shook her head. “That’s not the problem. Someone leaked a message about your raid against the Patriots’ League. If it hasn’t already reached the anti-Taldryan hawks on the Caelus Council, I’m sure it will by the end of the day—and they’ll be all too happy to point out that Taldryan military forces operating in the Imperial Sector without our own people being present is a violation of the Chyron Agreement.”

“If Caelus Security had agreed to Rian’s request that they apprehend the Patriots’ League members, I wouldn’t have *had* to send my own people to do it. My only other option was to sit back and do nothing while Taldryan was in danger, and you and I both know I can’t do that.” *Never mind how you found out about it at all,* Erinyes thought. She made a note to raise that issue with SRI once she was finished with Ky’Lian.

“Of course not, and if it weren’t for how recently the Collective incident took place, I might be willing to let the matter drop,” the Chancellor said. “Unfortunately, the people who believe that Taldryan is doing Caelus more harm than good were emboldened by Eriston’s actions. Finding out that Taldryan has been abducting people behind Caelus Security’s back could swing public opinion against you, and I don’t think either of us wants the trouble that would come with that.”

“I couldn’t care less what they think.” Erinyes paused for a beat, then sighed. “But I guess ignoring this will just lead to bigger problems in the long run, won’t it? Fine, what are you offering?”

“Offering?” Ky’Lian raised her eyebrows.

Erinyes rolled her eyes. “Come on, Chancellor. If I were in your position, I’d be looking for a chance to prove I wasn’t Taldryan’s puppet. You should be thanking me for giving you such a perfect opportunity.”

“I admit it’s politically convenient, but I also genuinely think that maintaining good relations with Taldryan benefits both sides. Unfortunately, it’s hard to convince others of that when they have to worry about being kidnapped by Taldryan commandos if they object too loudly. If I can assure the Council that the Patriots’ League members weren’t harmed and that Taldryan’s actions were justified, we can put the whole thing behind us,” Ky’Lian said.

Erinyes drummed her fingertips against her flask as she considered the offer. “Give me a standard day to dig up enough to justify C-Sec opening their own investigation, then I’ll release both the intel and the prisoners into their custody. After that, Taldryan will make every effort to keep Caelus Security in the loop when our activities involve Caelan citizens, and even operate jointly in the field when doing so wouldn’t compromise our objectives. Is that good enough?”

“The captives have to be unharmed. If they’re injured or traumatised somehow, I won’t be able to stop the outcry from the Council,” the Chancellor said.

“I’ll make sure nobody gets rough with them.” Erinyes had to stop herself from wincing when she realised what she’d said. It was too late to take it back now, though.

“Thank you, Consul. I’m sure we’ll speak again soon.” With a cordial nod, Ky’Lian cut the transmission.

Erinyes groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why the kriff did I agree to that?” Getting information out of someone in as little as a day was one thing, but doing it without resorting to the brutal techniques that Dark Jedi normally favoured was an entirely different beast. No, this would require a lot more finesse than Erinyes was used to applying.

Fortunately, Erinyes mused as she reached for the com terminal controls, she had people for that.

“Next time, let someone else do the negotiating.” Vodo’s words were punctuated by the whirrs and thumps of his mechanical legs.

“Maybe I’ll make *you* do it,” Erinyes groused, as they came to a stop outside an interrogation room. Through the window, she could see a lanky young Human with a mess of black hair. “This is one of the ones who saw us coming?”

Vodo nodded and handed Erinyes a datapad. “Kaizen Orech. Nineteen years old, med student at a local college. No run-ins with Caelus Security.”

“Is he Force-sensitive?” Erinyes skimmed through the file Vodo had given her, but there didn’t seem to be any other noteworthy information.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I don’t sense anything from him, and Arvalis is still on his way here,” Vodo said.

“Well, if he is hiding it, he can’t keep it up forever.” Erinyes handed the datapad back to Vodo. “What about the rest of them?”

Vodo shook his head. “As far as Caelus Security is concerned, they’re all nobodies. No criminal records, no military training; just average people. Even the one with the repeater pistol had all the proper licences to own it. As far as we can tell, the only thing they have in common is that they don’t like Taldryan, which means they’re either genuinely normal people or have very well-developed covers.”

“So these aren’t the people who are plotting the attack.” Erinyes sighed.

“No, but they’ll know how to contact other parts of the network,” Vodo said. “Arvalis is on his way down. When he gets here, we’ll start interrogating them the best we can with the restrictions you put on us.”

“Blame Ky’Lian for that,” Erinyes grumbled, and shouldered the interrogation room door open.

The young man looked up when he heard Erinyes enter, and for a moment, his gaze hung on her like so many other men’s did. “You were at the safehouse during the raid,” he said, once he’d gotten his thoughts under control—quicker than most would have, Erinyes noted.

“It was that or a budget meeting. Numbers might not kill you as fast as a blaster bolt, but they’re a lot more painful.” With her gaze fixed on Orech, the Adept folded her hands behind her back and began to pace. “I had a conversation with the Chancellor just before I came down here, and promised her that you and your friends would be turned over to Caelus Security, relatively unharmed, when we were done with you. Obviously, that limits the ways we have of convincing you to share what you know. That’s why, instead of letting Arvalis strap you to an interrogation table until you spend the rest of your days thinking you’re playing a game where you knock a ball into a hole, I’m just going to tell you why you’re going to help us.”

“After telling me that you can’t do your worst to me? Doesn’t sound very smart.” The teenager grinned.

“It probably isn’t. It’s still going to work, though.” Erinyes plopped down into the chair across from her captive. “I can tell you want to be one of the good guys. Defending innocents against the evils of the galaxy? You’d fit right in with the Odanites. Here’s the thing, though: if you let this attack happen, people are going to suffer unnecessarily.”

Orech set his jaw. “You’re the ones who made us resort to using force. If you don’t eant to put Taldryan in danger, you could leave.”

“Oh, I meant the Patriots’ League, not us. We’re already tracking down the cell that’s planning the attack. If we find them before It goes off, we call Caelus Security, and your friends will probably spend some time in jail. If we only find them after they’ve entered the Taldryan Sector, though, it’s a very different story.” Erinyes paused for a slug of tsiraki.

Orech’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

“Because our agreement with the Caelus Council says that the Taldryan Sector plays by Taldryan’s rules—*my* rules. I’m a big fan of the idea that the best way to prevent crime is to make examples of the people who get caught.” Erinyes leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table and clasping her hands together. “Your friends *will* get caught. The only question is whether their captor is a Chancellor who’d like to protect them, or a Consul who’s looking for revenge.”

“No. I won’t betray them.” The teenager shook his head, the motion sharp and defiant.

Erinyes slouched back in her chair. “Fine. We’ll see if you still feel that way when I’m done with them.” She studied Orech’s reaction as she reached for her flask. The suggestion of his comrades’ suffering made the young man wince, but not enough for Erinyes to think he was on the verge of cracking. *I should’ve sent someone who’s better at this kind of thing*, she thought.

Certain that the conversation was over and irritated at the outcome, Erinyes left the interrogation room. In the hallway, Vodo glowered down at her. He didn’t need to speak; his expression conveyed his amusement and annoyance as well as words could. “What are our other options?” Erinyes asked.

“Send people to tail them after we release them. They’ll have a way to warn other cells that they’ve been compromised, and we might be able to use that to track them,” Vodo said.

Erinyes frowned. “‘Might’?”

“Passing information while being watched is literally a spy’s job,” Vodo reminded the Consul. “If they’re any good at tradecraft, they’ll know how to communicate with each other without being spotted. Unless you go back on your agreement with Ky’Lian, that’s the best we can do.”

“Oh, I want to. I *definitely* want to. But you and Rian and the other former Consuls are all going to remind me that we’re still vulnerable and need reliable allies, and that we’ll never get those if we don’t keep our promises.” Erinyes sighed and emptied her flask. “Make sure the surveillance is in place by the time we release these terrorists.” Without waiting for an acknowledgement, she set off for the turbolifts in search of a refill.

[Scene 5: Second conversation with Ky'Lian, in which the Chancellor tells Erinyes that Orech, after being turned over to C-Sec custody, had a change of heart and revealed how the Patriots’ League cells communicate with each other. She’s sending a C-Sec unit to apprehend the courier, and invites Erinyes to send a Taldryan member along on the op, as a show of good faith. Erinyes decides to send Crysenia, and makes a point of telling Ky’Lian that Crys is NFU, equally as a gesture of good faith.]

“Chancellor. I’m starting to think you like me.” Erinyes smiled.

Ky’Lian chuckled. “Then what I’m about to tell you will probably reinforce that opinion. One of the Patriots’ League members you turned over to us had a change of heart. I don’t know what you said or did to him, but he told C-Sec how the League’s cells communicate with each other. I’ve instructed C-Sec to detain the messenger, and I’d like to offer you the chance to be there when it happens.”

Erinyes’ eyebrows shot up. “That’s… surprising. You were awfully insistent that the people we captured hadn’t done anything that would justify arresting them.”

“There’s a legal difference between detaining someone and arresting them, but I won’t bore you with the details. I do hope, however, that this will be the first of many cases where we cooperate with each other instead of butting heads,” Ky’Lian said.

“A show of good faith.” Erinyes pondered the gesture for a moment, then nodded. “Thank you, Chancellor. My Proconsul will probably murder me in my sleep if I reschedule the budget meeting again, but I’ll send someone on my behalf. Not Force-sensitive, so the C-Sec boys don’t have to look over their shoulders quite as much.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate that. Thank you, Consul. I’ll have C-Sec contact you with the details.” After a few more pleasantries, the Chancellor ended the transmission.

As soon as the link was cut, Erinyes hit another button on her desktop terminal. “Crysenia, come to my office. I’ve got an assignment for you.”

[Scene 6: Kicking down the doors of the actual terrorist cell, out in the Chyron swamps. C-Sec is supposed to lead the raid, and this time both Erinyes and Crysenia are there. C-Sec botches the job somehow (maybe or maybe not their fault) and Erinyes has to step in to rescue the op, including a speeder chase. The climax of the story is Erinyes deciding to do the CON-ly thing and not just straight-up murder the leader of the cell.]