

Collective Prison Station
Somewhere in space
About 10am

Red lights dimly lit the entire expanse of the station. Red alert. *Clearly someone thought this was a clever idea*, Qyreia thought as she steadily traversed through the halls of the station, with several Arcona Expeditionary Force soldiers in tow. They had already cleared the hangar and left a squad in place to deal with any counterattack. Now it was just a matter of finding their intended target, grabbing him, and getting the kark out.

There was just one problem: someone had been here first.

At intervals, there were bodies laying against the walls, and doors — *sliding* doors — that were completely removed from their frames and lay smashed on the floor. This all seemed somehow familiar, but neither the Zeltron nor any of the soldiers could place it. It could have been a Principate team, or maybe some other Brotherhood group. It was hard to tell anymore. Coordinated efforts between Clans and even Houses was almost unheard of. They all just sort of did their own thing. At any moment, they could come face to face with a Sadowan fireteam or a Collective squad, and it would be down to reflexes that decided if there was a friendly fire incident or worse.

“Boss,” Sergeant Jelenko, her squad leader, said just above a whisper. “Scanner’s pinging hot around the next corner.”

The Zeltron nodded, motioning the troops forward. One of the privates pulled a small mirror from one of the many pouches on his kit; definitely not standard issue and more of a personal prerogative. It came in handy for checking corners, as he displayed by edging it out just beyond the cusp of the wall, enough so that he could make out what lay out of direct line of sight. He threw up a pair of hand signals: *three-enemy*.

Steadily and quietly, they stacked up at the corner. At the signal of Qyreia patting the point-man’s shoulder, they wheeled around in a rush, instantly opening fire on the trio, catching the guards completely unawares and ending the fight almost as swiftly as it had begun.

As they passed by, one was not quite completely dead yet. “You’re... not...”

“We’re not what?” the Zeltron asked, crouching low. His eyes looked as though they were searching, disappointed or surprised at what he saw, before expiring entirely. “Kark.”

“What’s up?” Jelenko murmured as she crouched alongside.

“I think they’re looking for someone. Someone that isn’t us.”

“Whoever busted in all these doors and peeps?”

“Probably.”

Qyreia sighed. “Welp, let’s hope whoever it is, they’re on *our* side.”

A sharp hiss caught their ears, and their attention was turned to one of the soldiers motioning them further along. The two women shuffled over to the AEF trooper, the rest of the squad fanned out and providing security like they should.

“I heard something from that cell up ahead,” he whispered, little more than mouthing the words he was so quiet.

Sergeant Jelenko checked her scanner and confirmed the suspicion with a nod. Both Selenians followed close behind their red-skinned leader and readied their weapons. With a nod, they rushed the room, only to be awkwardly stopped short, almost tripping when a high-pitched scream pierced their eardrums.

Then the scream subsided in an instant as the origin recognized the soldiers and saw how they skidded to a halt. She was a frail looking young woman, with long, black curly hair that tumbled over her shoulders, framing a pretty face that would have looked pale if not for the dim emergency lighting. The most poignant detail, though, was the Arconan signet pin on the collar of her shirt. The handful of others that were with her were less familiar, but they all had some semblance of insignia on their person that identified them with some part of the Brotherhood or another.

“Don’t shoot! Please!” the woman said, almost crying. “M-Miss Arronen! You’ve gotta get us out of here!”

“Woahwoahwoah. Slow down. Who are you?”

The human inhaled, held it, and exhaled, steadying her nerves just a little. “My name is Violet D’slan. I’m the diplomatic representative for Arcona.”

“Uh huh...” Qyreia muttered, hearing this information for the first time, but still listening. “Go on.”

“We were captured by the Collective on a mission to the Severian Principate.” SHe motioned to her companions. “All of us. Mister Garmis was here earlier, but he... he

wouldn't take us. He grabbed the Deputy Grand Master and *left*." She practically cried the last word. "Please, *please*, get us out!"

"Hooold on," the Zeltron said haltingly.

Grabbing the scanner from Sergeant Jelenko, she crouched down to eye level with the human and let the camera on the device do its work, accessing databases of Arconan personnel files pre-loaded for just such occasions. Very useful when the mission is to grab the second in command of the entire Brotherhood. After several long moments of waiting, the raven-haired girl watching nervously the entire time, the scanner's display showed an abbreviated dossier file. *That's her alright.*

"Alright. Violet, yeah?" The human nodded. "Okay. We've got you, and we'll get you out of here. You said Strong was here earlier?"

"Y-yes," she breathed, her voice full of relief, visible in itself as her shoulders relaxed and slouched. "He is the cause of... *most* of the destruction."

"The doors and bodies?"

Violet's lips tightened in a mix of frustration and secondhand embarrassment. "Yes."

"Sounds like him," the Zeltron grumbled. "And he took Tavelian, or however you say his damned name, with him?"

"And left us behind, yes." Her eyes welled up and, unable to hold back anymore, threw herself against the Zeltron in a hug, nearly throwing her off balance. "Thank you! I thought we were going to be left behind! Thank you!"

"Easy," Qyreia said consolingly, patting the human's back. "Easy. You're safe." She looked to Jelenko. "Can you start getting these guys out of here?"

"You got it, Boss."

Gradually, the other prisoners filed out of the cell, stepping around the two embracing women. Qyreia was fine with letting the human get it out of her system. She remembered what it was like being a prisoner of war on Nancora. *Unpleasant* would have been an exceptionally generous term. The merc didn't want to even ask what they might have put Violet and the others through. At least they didn't seem very beat up. *And they have toilets in the cells. Nice.*

Jelenko tapped her shoulder, mouthing, "They're ready when you are."

“Hey, Violet,” she said soothingly, watching with some pity as the human came away, face shining and likely reddened from the tears she could still feel in her shirt. *Ugh, she’s too cute for this sort of poodoo.* “We’re going to send you to the hangar with the others, okay?”

“A-alright,” she whispered, trying not to break out in waterworks yet again. “Thank you.”

“You’ll be fine.”

She helped the human to her feet and back out into the hall where the other ex-prisoners were waiting with a small escort. With instructions to convey them to her ship and then return, she took a moment to relax and recenter her own nerves. Jelenko cleared a few more cells and posted guards further down the hall before letting the others take a more relaxed posture as well. The Zeltron took the time to type out a message on her wrist-comm to the droid back on her ship, where the vessel’s communications suite could relay it on to the rest of Arcona’s command group.

Jelenko, finished with her duties for a moment, took a seat by the red woman. “This lighting almost makes you invisible.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda stupid. Red lights on a station are stupid. It’s only really worth anything for going out at night.”

“Why’s that?”

“Eyes adjust better to darkness with red light instead of white. S’why they’re good for if there’s power issues on a ship or station. But this? This is just taking ‘red alert’ too literally.”

The Selenian got a chuckle from that, her eyes momentarily checking on her soldiers before looking to what the Zeltron was up to. “Whatcha doing?”

“Sending a report to the higher-ups.”

“What’s the message gonna say?”

“Well, aside from how we got a bunch of delegates out of here to be returned to their respective units, I got a bone to pick with Strong concerning his conduct in *leaving them all behind.*”

“That... I’m sure she’s telling the truth, but that sounds really weird for the general. He’s usually all about chivalry and that sort of stuff.”

“And she was *really* cute.” Jelenko raised an eyebrow pointedly. “What? She was. And Strong doesn’t tend to just leave the pretty damsels in the same distress he finds them.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“*Ha*,” she said with as much sarcasm as she could lay on. “No. Well, not the distress part. He’s helped me plenty of times before.”

“So what d’you think it is?”

Qyreia’s eyes narrowed, staring into space momentarily. “Someone that is playing a very dangerous game if she thinks this sort of stuff is gonna frackin’ fly.”

“Who?”

“Someone you don’t need to worry about yet. If it comes to it though, Arcona’s not going to be in a good spot internally. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Jelenko’s eyes widened and she sat back against the wall. “Well then.”

“Yeah.”

The Chiss’ relationship with the current, red-headed Consul was hardly a secret anymore, but there was history that suggested it was more than romance or even carnal desire. His head had been karked with somehow; his thoughts and even the ability to think for himself altered and directed in certain aspects. It was worrying.

That was a battle for a different day, though. After a little more waiting, the soldiers they sent on escort duty returned and the patrol through the prison station was recommenced. A few more prisoners were freed, even a few taken, before they finished their sweep. The station that the Collective had assumed small and innocuous enough to avoid being targeted was left derelict in the emptiness of space, with Qyreia’s *Katurno* packed with soldiers, and prisoners both freed and newly captured, rocketing away into hyperspace.

The Deputy Grand Master was freed, albeit not by the Zeltron’s hand, but it was still done, and she had served to increase the value of the raid. It was a smaller piece in a much bigger puzzle; a harbinger of things to come. And Qyreia would be there, along with all the other soldiers of Dajorra. Not for the Brotherhood that claimed suzerainty over them, but for the brotherhood they shared with each other.

Frack *Arcona invicta*.

Frack the Iron Throne.

It was the men and women around her that she gave a kark about, and that was who she would protect. Whether it was the Collective, or the Throne, or her own Clan. All too likely, that fire would be coming down on their heads all too soon.