

Undisclosed location
Cor'neria System
38 ABY

He knew she was a Force User as soon as he saw her.

She approached alone, which was the first clue. Only so many sorts in the Galaxy tended to be that self-assured and arrogant; Mandalorians, the occasional smuggler or flyboy, and Jedi.

Then there was the way she moved, unnaturally graceful, almost like she should have been floating or dancing when all it was was bloody walking. Her stride was calm, head held high, body easy. And she dressed like one of them too; gaudy robes, no armor, no visible, common weaponry. Just the tell-tale lightsaber at her sash and herself, because she **was** a weapon.

They ordered sniper shots from up in the tower. Neeka peered through his [viewfinders] as the attack signal came, watching red plasma bolts big enough to take out men or small land vehicles streak across the dark landscape. He also watched as they seemed to crash into...something...around her and dissipate into showers of sparks. She kept moving. The next three salvos didn't seem to do anything either.

Jun cursed next to him. Neeka didn't mind Jun, exactly; his fellow Partisan was a bit more on the vicious side of the two of them, but he was competent company on guard rotations. Neeka knew he'd been from a rougher sort of city life than his own colony one, but the Force-Users had still managed to ruin them both.

"Call up the damn airship," Jun snapped into his communicator. "It's not doing anything, just bomb that spoonbender right off the planet."

"I think she'll be here before they scramble," Neeka muttered, because the figure was really closing the distance now, approaching the outer wall and passing through the gates with a wave of a hand and an invisible shove to blast them open. Both Liberation Front members tensed and lifted their weapons.

But she didn't lift hers. She just kept walking, features resolving as she stepped into the light of the glowbanks and stopped in front of them: blindfolded, pointy ears, white hair and white robes and all that trim. She was *smiling*. She *curtsied*.

"Pardon me, dearest," the Miraluka addressed Jun. "But if I could just get by you, that would be lovely. I won't be more than a few minutes, I promise."

She smiled wider.

Jun fired his blaster right into her chest.

The robed woman hardly flinched. Jun gaped. Neeka gaped. There was a smoking hole there, wasn't there?

He blinked his eyes, but— *no there wasn't*.

And she wasn't smiling anymore.

"That," the Force-Using witch huffed, reaching out and touching two fingers to Jun's temple, "was rude. Let me rephrase: I am going inside, and you are going to escort me."

"I'll...escort you," Jun replied, visibly struggling, before his features went slack. "Come this way, ma'am."

"Thank you."

"Hold it," Neeka snarled, snapping out of it, but the woman was already gesturing at him too.

"Sleep, sweetling."

And so he did.

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She was so tired.

The cell was as cold and gray as ever when ringing klaxons awoke Violet with a start. Her heart leapt into her throat for a moment, anxious insects swarming and gnawing at her stomach while a wooly white-noise cottoned up between her ears and in her brain. She sat up on her cot and put her head between her knees, bent over, struggling to breathe through the affliction. In and out, in and out, slow...

Her head throbbed, badly. Not just from the sudden strain of adrenaline and lack of oxygen that came with a panic attack, but also with the exhaustion and the blaring of the alarms. They never sounded the alarms— nothing ever went *wrong* here. It just was. Day in and out, her gray walls and their chill food paste, it just was. The questions had stopped long ago when she had been deemed of no more usefulness or relevance, since they didn't seem to want her academic knowledge. And yet, now — she glanced to her left, looked at the little calendar she'd made with scratching — eight months since their arrival here, the alarms were ringing.

Her chest tightened again in fear. Violet twisted her fingers together over and over, worrying them, tense. Surely they would shut off soon? Just a test of the systems, that was only logical.

The guards would deliver her dinner and leave her be to the quiet again and she could try to get a little more sleep before the next time her brain got too restless and full of screaming with nothing to distract it.

But the alarms didn't stop, not for what seemed like forever — twenty-nine minutes, thirty-eight seconds, she counted, and kept counting in her head — and the noises only grew. She heard through her door guards shouting, footsteps moving, before they faded. But not the alarms.

And then her door creaked. Shuddered. The lock engaged, and then—

Someone *knocked*.

"Hello in there? Do not be afraid. I am going to open the door now, thank you kindly," a voice called, loud to be heard through the barrier and over the klaxons.

Her door did indeed open then, and a head, followed by a body, poked in. Violet shrank back on her cot as a tall, beautiful woman entered, dressed like—

Well. Like the Jedi she had served. At least, as dramatically, if not more colorfully.

"Pardon me, dear heart, hello. You are Violet, yes? Miss Violent D'slan?"

Being asked a direct question kick-started her nerves yet again, and she responded automatically. "U-um, y-yes, uh, ma'am, ahh, who— I'm sorry, **whoareyou?**" she squeaked out.

The Miraluka woman approached slowly, minding Violet's flinch. She smiled brightly at the Human, and it was the first smile Violet had seen in months. Her eyes welled, her cheeks suddenly hot.

"My name is Atyiru, my friend. I am here to rescue you," answered the woman just as sweetly as she smiled, leaning in to hug the slight scholar, and before Violet knew very much what was happening, she was clinging to the strange visitor and crying into her white robes.

A hand came up around her back, smoothing down her bruised shoulders, so warm. Fingers petted at her gnarly, oily hair so gently.

"Shhh, shhh, I know, I know. It's alright, dear girl, everything will be alright. I'm so terribly sorry it took me so long. I got here as fast as I could."

And for some reason, as the woman spoke, a calm came over Violet like she had never known. The feeling was soft and sweet and warm, like fresh cookies, like a good holo under a blanket, like a quiet moment and a cup of tea. She cried a little harder, but she felt—

Good.

Some time later, Violet didn't know how long, because she had stopped counting, for once in the last months, the Miraluka pulled back. She took off her turquoise cloak and draped it over Violet's shoulders and then guided her gently to her feet. Violet realized as she moved that her muscles didn't ache with cramps and cold, that her fingernails weren't bleeding and her knees and elbows weren't bruised or scraped. Her throat and mouth didn't even feel dry!

"...am I dreaming?" she wondered aloud, barely realizing that her rescuer was guiding her out into the hallway. They walked past some guards on the floor, who appeared to be...sleeping? Unconscious? They were breathing and looked unharmed.

Atyiru tittered a laugh, and it was enough to drown out the alarms for its rarity.

"No, my sweet. Now, do you think you can walk a bit more?"

"Y-yes, ah, I feel f-fine."

"Good. Now, let us go free our friends."

"Um, friends? Ma'am?"

"The other representatives, my dear."

"Oh, um, oh. Well we weren't really... Friends."

"Well then you are now! Not friends, nonsense! Come along, Violet."

One by one Atyiru went to the other cells in the block and unlocked the doors, finding the other Clan representatives. Violet's perfect memory supplied their names and information in her mind instantly: Araic Simonetti, Clan Naga Sadow; Damien Blackadder, Clan Odan-Urr; Darren "Shooter" McGavin, Clan Vizsla; Rozz'ados'aerke, Clan Plagueis; Qaanlug Vlux, Clan Scholae Palatinae; and Amari Ana, Clan Taldryan. All of them seemed in various states of wear as Atyiru attempted to talk each of them into the hallway, and, despite Violet's expectations that the others would never trust a random stranger from any other Clan or otherwise, they each, one by one, seemed to find themselves persuaded just like Violet.

"Now, I do not need to touch any of you to heal all of you at once, but it would help me to do this individually. The less I must concentrate, the more I can pay attention to our surroundings," Atyiru declared once she had them all gathered, and one by one, tended to each of them with what Violet now definitely knew were the powers of the Force. That was why she felt better. She had been healed.

When she got out of here — and apparently, it was *when* now, not if, not *never* — and was back to her normal self, she was going to look back on herself in this moment and be very disappointed in her deductive reasoning, traumatized or not.

The scholar had expected that once their wounds were attended to, they would be off. Surely they were still in danger, given the alarms and Atyiru's mention of vigilance? But instead the Miraluka told the others to wait there for her and then took Violet's hand as if it were normal to do and led her deeper into the compound.

For awhile, Violet didn't dare speak up, but eventually, her anxious curiosity got to her when they reached a room labeled Central Control. Atyiru waved a chit like those the guards carried around for a little while until it passed blindly by the locking mechanism, and then the door swished aside.

"U-um, ma'am, what are we d-doing?"

"I need to borrow your eyes, dear."

Panic tried to swell in her chest again. "Oh! O-oh, pl-please, no, Miss A-Atyiru, I w-want to keep my eyes, pl-pl-please—"

"*Violet*," the Miraluka shushed, gripping her shoulders. "I mean that I need your help, not that I am going to take your eyeballs from you. My goodness."

"O-oh," hiccuped Violet. "I-I-I'm sor—"

"You need never apologize to me, my friend. Now, chin up, dear heart. Breathe with me now. We've got work to do and little time. Bup, bup!" She tapped one finger to the Human's nose, then pulled away. The Miraluka gestured around the room with all its screens and machines.

"Whatever they have done to Evant-dear, it is preventing me from sensing him as I can the rest of you. I need to know which cell he is in."

"Oh...Okay, yes, I can, em, do that."

"And perhaps silence those alarms while we're at it. Terrible headache, those."

"Y-yes! I'll, ah, try!"

Violet scurried over to inspect the machines. Thankfully, it didn't take her too long to find the appropriate terminals for her respective tasks, and she silenced the klaxons with relish before going about slicing into the systems for access to rotate through the various camera systems. A

bit more fiddling when she didn't see anything recognizable on the screens, a check of administration logs, and something piqued her interest.

"This cell takes more power output than anywhere else in the facility save for the ground shield-generators. Does that seem like what you need?" asked the scholar, not stuttering once. Not when she had a task to study.

"For someone like Evvie, that sounds likely indeed. Take me there, if you would?"

"Right away," Violet replied, and then flushed. "I— ah, ma'am, Atyiru."

They hurried along, their steps much louder now that their ears were less deafened. They did run into more guards, but the Miraluka was quick to pull a blaster at her belt and stun some, or simply wave a hand at others, ordering them to sleep. Violet wondered who indeed the woman was, if it was the same Atyiru mentioned in Arcona's archives and rosters, the one meant to be, well...

Not here and alive.

Very suddenly, before they even reached the door they needed, Atyiru stopped. Violet nearly stumbled.

"This is it. I can sense it. A...null area."

How was that possible? the scholar wondered, but it was an inquiry to research another time.

"Ah, yes, a-alright. Then shall we get the o-others, or...?"

"I am going in to get him. Just wait right here for me please, I may need you. I shan't be long though, sweetheart, I promise!"

"B-but, um, m-ma'am, uh, Miss Atyiru, w-won't you be, you know..." She waved her hand. "Blind in there too? If it's cut off from the Force?"

But Atyiru just smiled at her, always smiled smiled smiled.

"Don't you worry, Violet. Everything will be alright."

And then she activated that lightsaber she hadn't drawn once yet, stepped up, and began to cut through the wall.

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The world is nothing.

Just nothing. Nothing. Dark and nothing. Silence and nothing. Nothing and more nothing. It had been something once, perhaps, but for so long nothing that that idea of something was only an echo of a thing. And there were not *things* in nothing.

It just is.

So it is nothing, and then—

Then it *breaks*. The world *cracks*, and *bright bright something cutting bright*—

And then there is pain.

It burns the nothing. The bright and the pain burns in the nothing. And it moves the nothing, and then—

More more *more more more more*—

It has a body.

That is what the something is. It is a body, and it is— feeling— something.

Too much so much bright burn pain cold rough too much too much too much—

And it has a body that feels, and it hears, and it knows sounds without understanding them.

"Oh, Evant...I'm...o sorry...hold...old on...shhh, shhh..."

Touching, gripping the body. Cold, hard. So heavy.

"... It's a... sensory deprivation tank... He'll be very sensitive. Have to... remove the ventilator..."

It has a chest and a throat and they rip it open. It gasps.

"...et Gavin, need him t...elp carry..."

It gasps and that hurts the body too. Touch hurts. Air hurts. It all hurts. It hurts him, he—

He. The body is him.

He screams.

He screams, because he is a being with memory and he wishes to die.

-x-

Rath Oligard stared at his holoviewer and breathed.

Behind the hulking champion of the Collective and all free peoples, one of his confidants — his advisor and friend — stirred in his place.

"What has you concerned?" Varryn asked, finally glancing up from his datapad. Capital Enterprises never stopped moving, and neither did Varryn's eyes on that pad.

"Aventus has sent his report. They finally came to get their deputy."

Varryn got to his feet, paced over to join Rath in observing the feeds.

"I was beginning to think they would never claim the bait. You ought to be happy. A measure of success in our figures." Calculating eyes raked over him. "And yet you are not."

"I will not be happy until our work is done, Varryn," Rath intoned firmly, but shook his head. "I am perturbed, however. Look closer."

His advisor did so, watching the feeds awhile. His gaze followed the representatives and their rescuer — a lone woman — escaping with relative, carefully crafted ease from the compound. Varryn reached out, fiddling, to rewind and replay the recordings, starting at the first contact sighting from the outer cameras and airship feeds to the procession through the prison, up to the Deputy Grand Master's extraction.

"Was she not on our roster of eliminated targets?"

"Trust a Force-User to despoil even death with their sheer arrogance."

His wife and daughters rotted in the ground, killed by a war the Jedi started, abandoned by the ones meant to protect them, and here came yet another flaunting their unnatural power only for herself.

"Hmm," Varryn hummed, obviously thinking, and switched the feeds back to their live feature. The whole affair was nearly done now, the prisoners approaching the entrance where they would find no additional resistance, no backup of legions to crush them. The two men watched on.

The Miraluka in white on the feed paused mid-step. Stopped. Turned her head.

Rath took in a breath.

"What?" asked Varryn.

"She sees us."

The advisor's brow furrowed.

"She doesn't seem to be looking at any of the cams— she doesn't have eyes."

"No, my friend," rumbled Rath. He tapped another screen, indicating the galactic positioning coordinates for the base they observed as its planet rotated around its home star. He traced a path to the moon base they currently inhabited. "She is not looking at the recorders, she is *looking at us.*"

"...that can't be possible, we're half a system away."

"Never underestimate our enemy, my friend."

Varryn appeared extremely displeased. He muttered to himself and took up his datapad again. Rath knew he would not be satisfied until he had processed this new information into all his calculations. Good.

But the Grand Admiral merely watched awhile longer, as if bidding one of their own troops goodbye as Deputy Taelyan was escorted away. And indeed, in a way, the wretch was. His part to play would come. Assuming, that was, that this resurrected woman did not bring with her any further surprises.

Rath turned away eventually, closing the feeds.

"Bring me the report on the casualties for the facility when it comes," he told Varryn. "And send me the data on that Jedi. I need to know if we are dealing with another pawn or a new empress on this board."

"Your will be done," Varryn called distractedly, though Rath knew the other man listened and executed always.

The doors *snicking* shut like the lock on a trap followed behind him.

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