

--[REDACTED]--

## Prison World

38 ABY

Slab sided, ancient, and with all the aerodynamics of a brick, the *Esperanza* plowed through the dust choked clouds above a remote moon, one so insignificant it hardly registered on official star maps. The XS Light freighter's scanners had a lock, however, showing a sensor return from the surface where a desolate outpost had been quarried into a jutting cliff face. The outpost was unmarked, but the stylistic choices of its outward design spoke loudly of its owners; the Collective.

Seemingly abandoned, the structure had been worn down to bare durasteel by the gale force winds and the choking clouds of sand they kicked up in great storms. Even now, in the eye of a relative calm, the *Esperanza*'s engines were struggling to cope and her Kaminoan pilot was being pushed to constantly adjust the intakes in order to keep the ship airborne.

Although it seemed like nothing could survive here, Yumni Ha knew this was the place. The Collective had a number of prisoners they'd accumulated over time and the worst offenders were kept here, away from prying eyes and surrounded by flesh-stripping sandstorms. She found it hard not to commend them on their choice of venue, it surely kept guard costs down.

As the *Esperanza* swerved around the complex, looking for landing pad, a small hatch opened on one of the sand blasted towers and a tri-barreled laser cannon emerged, its targeting reticles searching for the freighter's silhouette. Over the comms of her ship, Yumni heard a flash of static before a gruff voice sounded.

*"This is a restricted area. Depart at once, or face the consequences of trespassing."*

The Kaminoan's expression remained unchanged as she flicked the transceiver on her comms unit and gave her monotone reply.

*"Access code Wesk-Trill-Forn-Seven-Seven-Seven. This is the commercial freighter Esperanza, hailing in lieu of the Odo-Maru. Unless you wish to blow up your ration shipment, please advise where I am to land."*

There was a long pause over the line, though the turret did not cease tracking her ship. Eventually, the gruff voice came back, this time sounding surprisingly sheepish.

*"Access code verified. We're lighting up the landing pad."*

*"Very good. Do you accept waste recycling or should I dump the bilge in the canyon?"*

The question clearly caught the Collective administrator off guard.

*"I don't fraking care where you dump it, but we're not handling your kark."*

Down on the ground, half-buried beneath layers of sand, bright floodlights popped to life, casting their illumination upon oval landing pads that clearly weren't intended for heavy traffic. It seemed this place did not get many visitors.

"Acknowledged," Yumni replied and cut the link, bringing her ship about and dumping the bilge over the canyon before making to land. The buffeting winds rattled the venerable ship to its bulkheads, but even against the howling winds she managed a smooth landing on the sand choked platform.

She considered shutting the engines to save on fuel, but another look through the cockpit window at the raging storm in the distance told her she might be better served keeping them running. By the time the freighter was ready to be departed, a pair of shapes were laboriously making their way towards the ship. Dressed in heavy armor designed to withstand the hardships of exposure, they hauled with them a tracked conveyor upon which the delivered goods were to be placed. Clearly, repulsorlifts were not too *ideal* in the climate. Not least for their tendency to get blown away.

Yumni had wrapped herself up tight in as much clothing as she could muster, looking rather like an elaborate mummy than a person. Making sure the subsections were well sealed, along with the internal ducts, she braved the cargo ramp and opened the doors for the arriving guards. Yumni was almost swept off her feet by the buffeting gust that assailed her, forcing the trader to cling on to the door frame for dear life.

The foremost guard saw this and chuckled, although Yumni had no way of knowing this from behind his visored helmet and the howling of the wind. The pair made their way up the ramp and into the relative safety of the *Esperanza's* cargo hold. Stacks of crates and containers were lined up neatly within, various shapes and sizes of ironically named standard modules placed in their own designated areas as per their destination.

The mummified Kaminoan waddled ahead, stiffly managing to lead them over to a pile of goods destined to this remote prison. She peeled back the layers of cloth around her mouth and tasted sand, despite her best efforts to the contrary. She'd need to cleanse once this horrid mission was over, but now was not the time to worry about its chafing presence.

"I extend the sincerest condolences of the *Odo-Maru's* captain. Circumstances beyond his control led to him not being able to deliver these goods in person."

"Oh? And what circumstances were those?" the lead guard asked, not bothering to take his helmet off as they began loading the crates onto the tracked conveyor.

"He got blown up."

“Well, that would explain it. We’ve been waiting on these for ages. Almost contacted command,” the guard muttered.

“Again, I am sure the late captain would be most regretful about any inconvenience his untimely departure has caused you.”

The guards exchanged a look, not certain whether the Kaminoan was mocking the deceased or not. From the lack of intonation, it was impossible to tell. Thankfully, loading the conveyor did not take long and soon enough the crates were secured for the perilous hundred meter journey back into the prison facility.

“Right, if you’re taking over this route from the *Odo-Maru*, you’ll get paid the same way. We don’t handle credits here,” the guard stated as they headed for the ramp once more.

“Oh yes, I’ve made arrangements. However, there is *one* thing I would like to discuss.”

The guard turned around and looked at the odd woman, at least he presumed it was a woman. “And what’s that?”

“I cannot imagine how *boring* it must get stuck inside that cramped outpost for months on end, and I happen to have a selection of entertainment products available for purchase,” Yumni began, opening the lid on a crate she’d left lying nearby.

The guards halted, clearly intrigued, and approached this potential cornucopia of remedies to the infernal boredom. Within the simple storage crate, they found a whole host of items they’d been dreaming of during the long hours of monotonous guard duty, including inebriating substances, holovids and games, as well as some rather scandalous publications that no self-respecting person would ever admit owning.

“You, uh, said these were for sale?” the guard asked, visibly itching to sample a few choice products on offer. “How much?”

“I’m willing to give you *all* of these in exchange for fifteen minutes of time.”

The guards exchanged a confused look. “You wanna talk or do like... *other stuff*? Because I’m not letting any alien dingus near my a—”

“Nothing of the sort,” Yumni cut him off with a raised hand. “Merely fifteen minutes with one of the residents inside that complex of yours.”

“So you know what we are, huh?” the guard’s tone had darkened considerably, suspicion heavy in his voice. “What makes you think we won’t just blast you, and *take* what we need.”

“Firstly, yes. It is quite obvious between the remote location and lack of windows, with those few ones having bars upon them. Secondly, you’re happy to do so, but I must inform you that only I know of the *Odo-Maru*’s demise. So if you intend on getting resupplied anytime soon, it might pay you to keep me alive.”

“Sithspit! You said the *Odo*—”

“That is because I killed him.”

The guards fell silent, considering their options. Finally, one spoke up. “Fifteen minutes? Just talking?”

“Merely talking.”

“We won’t let you into their cell.”

“That is not required, but I do wish to see them.”

“Fine, you’ve got a deal.”

“Excellent, the crate is yours.”

The guards hauled the box of valuables atop the stacked shipment of suddenly trivialized items such as rations and began their perilous journey back to the prison proper, the Kaminoan struggling to follow them through the storm. As they pressed on through the storm, Yumni kept a close eye on the edges of the prison compound, smiling beneath her layered scarves when she saw the flicker of a shape climb over the edge and disappear down a vent. Once inside the compound, Yumni began to truly appreciate the desolate nature of this incarceration facility.

Constant howling, and the shallow rasping of sand brushing over the outer walls permeated the air within, sending chills down her spine and grating her ears though she’d only been there but a moment. The dim lighting was kept to a minimum, and the temperature low. She could not imagine the cells were by any means pleasant if this was what the guards had to endure.

She was led past a control room where a handful of bored guards were observing a host of pict screens showing live feeds from the various cells. Most of the inmates seemed either restless or completely still, visibly climbing up the walls or in a deep slumber. None appeared *normal*, but perhaps that was why they’d been sent to this place.

Yumni unfurled the scarf she’d pulled around her mouth to unsuccessfully keep out the sand, wiped her face in it and chugged the bundle into a waste bin with visible disgust.

“This way,” the man she’d conversed with said, gesturing to a turbolift that would take them further down into the complex. The cramped elevator was, like most of the interior she’d seen, in poor maintenance and struggling with sand. It seemed to get everywhere.

As the carriage descended down the levels of identical cell blocks, each curving around a central control pillar, the guard finally took off his helmet to expose the heavily augmented face of a palid Umbaran. His gaunt features and dark grey skin matched the cybernetics well, or at least as well as polished durasteel could fit a sickly organic skin tone.

He turned to look at the tall alien who was having to hunch down a little to fit inside the elevator.

“So who is it you wanted to see?”

“He goes by the name Kame. A tall, pale male with dark eyes...”

“Oh, *him*. Yeah, I know who you’re talking about,” the Umbaran looked away, suppressing a shiver. “Not my place to ask, but why the *frak* would you want to talk to that bastard?”

Yumni did not tear away her gaze from the rows of cell blocks, and the faint flicker of a distortion a few levels down. “He’s my brother.”

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The rest of the journey to the cell was spent in silence, the revelation striking the Umbaran into stillness and the Kaminoan remaining tight-lipped. The cell was, as she’d suspected, extremely spartan with barely more than a cot and a basic refresher bolted to the wall within it. The entire front wall was made of reinforced transparisteel, leaving the inmate precious little in the shape of privacy from the guards.

However, this did not seem to bother the particular inmate Yumni had come to visit, seeing as he lay on the bed, one leg over the other, staring at the ceiling yet utterly unmoving. The bright orange jumpsuit he wore seemed cheap in make and poor of fit, but none of the appalling amenities around him seemed to phase the Kaminoan one bit. In fact, he seemed to almost *enjoy* it.

“Halt! What are you doing here? This isn’t your sector!” a pair of Collective prison guards stopped them before they could approach the cell.

“Relax,” the Umbaran placated his fellow guard. “We’re just here for a quick meeting with number Five-Five-Nine.”

“Five-Five-Nine? Why the *frak* is anyone visiting him? And who is that woman? Is this authorized?” the guard spewed out a litany of questions, all of which were silenced when the Umbaran produced a titillating magazine depicting scantily clad Twi’leks and propped it into the guard’s chest.

“Enjoy! Make sure we’re not interrupted for the next fifteen minutes and I’ll throw in a flask of Corellian brandy.”

The guard gave the Umbaran a disgruntled look, but a quick glance at the centerfold changed his mind. “Fine, but if you want to *touch* the inmate, that’s extra.”

“Don’t worry, she’s just here to talk.”

And with that, the guards let them pass into a shallow foyer that acted as an isolation chamber between the prison cell and the grander complex, ensuring that there was never a direct route to the outer world, even during feeding time.

“The belt, leave it,” the Umbaran ordered gruffly.

Yumni gave a quizzical look.

”I’m gonna need you to empty your pockets too. Can’t have you leaving anything behind.”

Sighing, the Kaminoan did as she was told, pulling out her datapad from her pocket and sliding it onto a small desk outside the cell. Her equipment belt followed, missing one of her usual choices of grenade, and finally the blaster pistol the guard had deemed safe for her to carry this far into the compound. Whether that was gross negligence on his part, or a testament to how utterly harmless they considered her, Yumni could not quite tell.

Satisfied, the man grunted and gave a nod. “Go on, I’ll start the clock when you step inside. Fifteen minutes, don’t forget.”

“*Fifteen minutes*,” Yumni replied, pulling off her communicator and placing it next to her datapad. “That is all I need.”

The transparisteel door was opened and she stepped inside, the portal closing immediately in her passing and bolting shut. Now standing in a confined space that still did nothing to diminish the whistling sounds from outside, she made her way towards the front of the cell and the wide transparisteel wall beyond which the other Kaminoan waited.

She paused and waited, observing the bare feet of the clearly awake, yet stubbornly immobile Kaminoan. Precious seconds were being wasted. She didn’t have time to play his games.

“I am pleased to see you are still alive, *brother*,” she spoke in Kaminoan.

Her words aroused no reaction from the man inside the cell.

“You might at least respond to me. I doubt you get many visitors.”

"I have no sister," Kame replied, still staring at the ceiling with supreme disinterest. "At least none that is still alive."

Yumni observed the stubborn monster for a moment longer.

"I see it was a mistake to come here. You have not changed one iota."

"One of many you've made so far, *Yumni*. Do not chastise yourself too much for it. What else could one expect from a blue-eyed degenerate?"

The attempt to get a reaction out of her was laughably obvious. So obvious, in fact, that it became insulting in itself. The man did not even *bother* trying to get under her skin.

"And yet you are the one behind bars," she replied, masking the hint of anger in her voice. "Did you not say you would create a legacy to outshine mine? I have already achieved plenty, and you remain here, *incarcerated*."

Finally, the other Kaminoan deigned to rise from his cot. Even in the cheap and baggy jumpsuit, the pallid alien looked wiry to an extreme, his narrow face withered from malnutrition and his dark grey eyes sunken into their pits. Even so, they shone with a dangerous intelligence that had seen him as an asset to the same people who now kept him behind lock and key as a dangerous monster.

"To correct you, *once again*," Kame stated coldly, "I never said I would be *creating* anything. The word I used was *carve*."

Their eyes met through the transparisteel, Yumni's celestial blues against the smoky greys of her brother.

"So typically *narrow minded* of you to consider a legacy is left by building a monument." If a Kaminoan could spit with disdain, Kame had just managed it. "You toil endlessly in a vain effort to build a sad little epitaph to yourself, but all you will ever build will be eroded by time until nothing of it remains. Meanwhile, the trench my creations will carve in the galactic population will persist for generations. A lasting scar that will be felt forever."

Yumni stared blankly at her raving brother, though to give the minutely less bland delivery such a descriptor was being too generous. She was aware of what he'd tried to do in service of the Collective, before they'd stopped him. Before they'd saved themselves from his madness.

"So you *have* been following my progress," Yumni responded, feigning elation. "I knew you did care."

Kame exhaled forcefully, barely a huff.

“Very well, Yumni. Since you went through so much trouble, I will humor you—for the last time. Why did you come?”

“To see how far you’ve come, and I must say I am not disappointed. Like so many times before, you aimed beyond your means and fell from grace. If I’d had half the chances you’ve had, I’d be running a quarter of the galaxy, but you seem to insist on choosing hubris.”

“Amusing,” Kame nodded. “But you’ve always been the worse of us at reading people. I *know* you are not here because of me.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“You wouldn’t have paid to see me. You take no enjoyment out of this, if you are even capable of enjoying *anything*, yet you parted with something in exchange for—nothing. No, that is not the Yumni I know.”

“Perhaps you do not know me as well as you think?”

“Oh no, I know you inside and out, dear Yumni. I read you like an open datapad. I can see your every insecurity. Every flailing attempt to *matter*. All the effort you waste in a pitiful bid to gain the acceptance of your betters...”

Yumni pressed her lips to an imperceptible line. The dim lights outside flickered once, before returning to normal.

“...right down to your terrible acting.”

The line vanished.

“Oh yes, I said I could see through you, *dear Yumni*. You are not here for me. You are here for someone else. All of this,” he made a wide gesture, “it is just a show. A distraction for that hapless Umbaran to fall for so that someone infinitely more capable can achieve the *real* task.”

“And what task is that?” Yumni inquired, doing her level best to keep her voice from trembling.

“This place houses all manner of enemies of the Collective, and I know you’ve thrown in your lot with the Arconans.”

Yumni furrowed her brow, visibly confused by his admission.



“Yes, very touching, I do still mind where my blind sibling stumbles. I am not a *heartless* monster. Just a useful one. And I suspect that once you break out whatever enemy of theirs you’re here for, they may very well decide they have need of my services once more...”

Sibling stared at the other, their expressions inscrutable but to a fellow Kaminoan. He knew he was right, and she knew that he knew.

“Well played, *brother*,” Yumni finally admitted. There was no point hiding it. “If you are not going to inform the guard about your *revelation*, then I suspect we are done here.”

“Yes,” Kame agreed. “I suspect we are. Until we meet again, *sister*.”

Yumni did her best to disguise the seething resentment within her as she turned to leave, Kame returning back to his cot to stare at the ceiling, no doubt laying down the final touches on his next attempt at immortality.

“*One* more thing, dear Yumni,” he called out after her. “I do not believe the Collective destroyed *all* my work. I will be looking forward to seeing them deployed against your colleagues with great interest.”

The trader felt a chill run down her spine as the door unlocked to let her out. If there was one man in the galaxy who could make good on his threats, it was that absolute monster.

The Umbaran had lost interest in their alien conversation and instead busied himself with picking out kernels of sand from his cybernetics. It was a chore he would seemingly never finish.

“Did you get what you came for?” he asked out of boredom once the pale alien stepped out and they headed for the turbolift.

“Unfortunately so,” Yumni agreed, fitting her blaster back onto her belt. She had a sinking suspicion she might be needing it before long.

The elevator ascent was as dull as the descent, up until they reached the mid levels. Flickers of static caused the Umbaran guard to pick out his communicator and attempt to adjust it, growling in annoyance at the malfunctioning piece of tech.

“Must be the sand,” Yumni stated unhelpfully.

The issue did not clear by the time they reached the summit, at which point the cause for the disturbance was made evident. The control center was in a mild state of chaos, with half the screens showing nothing but static and the rest flickering wildly. The guard detail was frantically trying to regain control over the situation and the Umbaran could see he’d be called to assist at any moment.

“Go,” he hissed at Yumni, “Get to your ship and leave. I’ve had enough of you for one day.”

Yumni had no desire to argue to the contrary and fled away as best she could in her bulky wrappings. By the time she was halfway to her ship, the klaxons began blaring. They must have noticed the number of prisoners had suddenly been reduced by a choice few.

Breaking into a full sprint, a form of physical exercise Yumni thoroughly loathed, she fought her way through the sandstorm back to the awaiting *Esperanza* that had somehow managed not to choke her engines. Ion jets sputtering, the ship rose unsteadily into the air, swerving in place under the buffeting barrage of the turbulent cross winds.

Up in the freighter’s cockpit, Yumni fought the controls while trying to get a signal through to the Twi’lek’s communicator. It should have been hardened against the EMP grenade, at least better than the Collective surveillance equipment.

“...zztcht—Ha? Do you readt? Where the frak are you?!” Tali Sroka’s voice finally sounded.

“I’ve lifted off. What are your coordinates?”

“...—aking coordinates! Ve’re underneath the prison. By a vaste chute. HURRY!”

The pressing tone was not lost on her, and the Kaminoan banked her ship away from the landing pad at a dangerously aggressive angle. Diving beneath the jutting cliff face upon which the prison had been built, she turned her scanners to search for heat signatures and almost immediately spotted the cluster of tiny dots clinging to a waste pipe at the base of the cliff, overlooking a sheer drop of hundreds of meters.

Wrestling the winds into submission with the raw power of her ship’s engines, Yumni swerved her ship down beneath them and opened a top hatch, a series of dull *thumps* that soon followed signalling her that the extraction had been successful. Opening the throttle to full, she guided the *Esperanza* away from the prison complex at the head of a massive storm front, leaving behind the one thing that truly terrified her in this galaxy.

They breached atmosphere and the rattling and jostling finally ceased, the merciful stillness of space descending upon them. Armored footsteps sounded behind her and she turned to glance at the weary Twi’lek covered in what she presumed was—

“Yes, it vas a *sithy* extraction. But I hadt to improvise,” Tali Sroka muttered, revulsion clear on her face.

“I do not blame you, miss Sroka. But please, use the refresher. Generously, if I may ask.”

Tali shot her a look, but pressed on.

“Just get us back to Dajorra. Lucine has a meeting with the Deputy Grandt Master.”

“And what of the others?” Yumni inquired.

“Huh? Oh yes, I suppose the Clans might want their pawns back. Violet sure looked worse for wear.”

Yumni nodded and returned to the controls, easing the *Esperanza* into hyperspace. “Another successful delivery by the Arconan Logistics and Shipping Company.”