

Rhent Ghosan's desk could have covered half the price tag for his vessel, the *Exeter*, had he decided to sell it. A solid chunk of Wroshyr heartwood, a dozen proton-teethed saws had been necessary to carve it out of its home within the jungles of Kashyyk. The timber was incredibly dense and fantastically hard; master wood-carvers had worked on it for years, inch by inch, turning the rude block into a work of art that gleamed like polished obsidian under the light. Beautiful. Functional.

There was a piercing clatter as the agent dropped an armful of *junk* onto his desktop. Datapads, papers, and his ornate forged-beskar chronometer spilled to the floor in a small tidal wave. Rhent watched all of this happen without moving, speaking, or blinking. Just taking the chaos in. The Chief Executive Officer and President of Arx Capital Exchange, he wielded power over the Dark Brotherhood that was matched only by the Grand Master, his close friend. He moved enough credits to buy starships or bid on star systems, controlled a system of contacts that had brought down business empires in the span of minutes, and personally commanded the loyalty of thousands of contractors.

And right now, he was powerless to do anything but give a long-suffering sigh in the face of the brightly smiling Zabrak sitting across from him. Piercing hazel eyes trailed over her armor, noting the various scorch marks and ugly dents that marred its brazen coloring. Sera Kaern had been highly recommended by Clan Arcona's consul, praised as an able combat agent and worthy negotiator. Her willpower, however, had been her most commended trait.

Willpower indeed. Next time, he'd just go himself.

"I... am going to assume that the negotiations did not go as planned?" he asked quietly, running a hand through his hair. The awkward grin that he got was all the response that he needed. "Don't... don't even say anything. Did you at least secure the prototypes?"

"Yep! They're... uh, all here!" she responded in the affirmative, motioning to the pile of scrap that she had dumped onto his beautiful, beautiful desk. "They... uh, they don't *look* like much, buuuuut...yeah. They fought pretty hard to get 'em back, at least."

Rhent gave her a long stare, eyes flitting between the Zabrak and the trash-heap. Finally, he sighed again, a sound that was almost mournful.

"Just... just tell me *everything*, so that I can start fixing this mess."

"Right! So... it started with this blue guy... uh, some CEO or something... asking about a 'transfer of productive capital,' whatever that is..."

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“You mean to tell me that the Armanite Conglomerate is putting *no* productive capital on the line for this deal?” the Duros questioned, thin lips bending into a frown. Sera gave a nervous chuckle, eyes flitting to the datapad that she was holding under the table to check. From the general sense that she was getting, gently examining his mind with the Force, productive capital was... equipment? Factories?

Ancestors, she hated economics.

“Uhhh... *no*. The deal... the deal is that we bring capital transfers -including, erm, transport through our merchant fleet- after we negotiate our main merger deal. So... we bring you guys aboard, and then you get access to the capital. That sound... reasonable?”

The Duros tittered, sapphire fingers rapidly tapping away on his datapad. “My superiors see no reason by Hathabasa Industries should subordinate ourselves to a half-rate corporation in the Principiate market,” the alien drawled, crimson eyes narrowing. “*Especially* considering the nature of their... emissary.”

At that, Sera’s awkward grin faded at the edges. “...is that me?”

“Who else? Now, girl, unless you have any further additions to these negotiations, I believe that we are done here,” he stated finally, blue fingers folded. Sera sighed slightly in response. The talks hadn’t gone anywhere at all. The moment that they had gotten past introductions, she was in over her head, inundated in trade-terminology that left her absolutely befuddled. Despite Rhent’s attempts to brief her, economics had never really been a focal point of tribal study.

But, she wasn’t defeated, not quite yet. Rhent had anticipated that she wouldn’t be able to negotiate a merger, and provided a second route of attack. If they couldn’t get them to come over to their side... they could try and buy out whatever wonderful product prototype that they had been using to control the Severian Principiate’s market. Then, there was plan C.

If they couldn’t buy the prototypes, they would simply take them. The Armanite Conglomerate, afterall, was nothing but a shell for Arx Capital. A hit to their reputation wouldn’t hurt at all, especially considering the rewards that might be reaped.

Her sense of honor grating at the thought of the bribery, Sera shook her head, shooting the Duros negotiator a wide, toothy smile. “Now.... we don’t, uh, *need* to be done here, do we? Just ‘cuz we can’t work out a deal with Hathabasa doesn’t mean we can’t figure something out just between the two of us...” she suggested. As she spoke, the Zabrak reached into her pocket and withdrew a bar of pure electrum. According to Rhent, it was worth tens of thousands of credits... and if the sudden surge of greed that she sensed radiating off of the Duros was any indication, it was an effective bargaining chip.

Nervously licking his lips, the blue alien snatched the bar out of Sera's hand, examining it. "This is... pure? Untraceable?"

"No serial number, no tracker, no nothing. Pure, easy credits," the Zabrak assured confidently, her grin widening. As he slipped the bar into his pocket, Sera reached out with the Force once more, probing the edges of his mind. She could feel the gears in his head turning, sense the thought, the treachery. Her only folly was believing that he was preparing to betray his *business*. More naivete on her part.

She realized what he was reaching for under his desk just too late to stop him. There was a slight click, and the room was suddenly drenched in blaring, bloody light. Immediately, the Duros was on his feet, screaming.

"GUARDS! GUARDS!! GET IN HERE AND APPREHEND THIS LITTLE-..."

His shouting cut off with a sharp *thwack* as Sera leapt from her chair, launching into a spinning kick that took him in the back of his round, blue head. Groaning, the negotiator crumpled to the floor... just as the door slid open, and several armed guards stepped through. They didn't look happy.

"Uh... I...I can explain?"

Blasters were raised. The amber blade of her saber ignited.

Things went downhill from there.

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"Right... well, I can see how that would be problematic," Rhent admitted, examining an object from the pile of 'prototypes'. He had taken to sifting through it while she regaled him with the catastrophe that the negotiations had been, examining each object closely in turn. Honestly, he was quite surprised by... the varied quality of the merchandise. Some of it was straight junk. Oddly made datapads, a poor copy of a lightsaber, an odd sort of caf-maker, what looked like a roll of toilet paper... things with no value at all, even as knick-knacks. But, some of it...

Two microchips with a very odd design, like nothing he'd ever seen.

A droid-brain's blue box, with some sort of modification to it, cut into a polyhedral shape.

A short-bladed knife that almost seemed to hum, with a vibrant pink streak along its edge. Something about its design was familiar...

“Yeah. Problematic. They only *really* freaked out once I grabbed ahold of whatever this kark is, though. Like they were trying to hide something,” Sera supposed, scratching at her horns. Rhent didn’t reply right away, sweeping the remainders of the pile away from his desktop, fingers running over a small scratch in the wood. Whoever was supplying Hathabasa Industries appeared to have some serious tech at their back. More inquiries would need to be...

Wait.

A scratch in the desk?

Eyes widening, Ghosun’s fingers flew back to the gash in the wood, gently running over it. It was long, smooth, emanating a faint warmth. That... should have been impossible. The impact of *turbolasers* hardly dented prime Wroshyr; nothing should have been able to dent it, to even *mark* it.

A suspicion crept into Rhent’s mind. As Sera continued to talk, he stood, crossing around the desk to where his ornate chronometer had fallen. Forged out of solid beskar, it had cost him a fortune, much like everything else within his office, and should have been virtually indestructible.

Hefting it in his hand, he brought the odd knife around, slowly driving the blade downward, towards the ultra-hard metal.

The pink edge of the knife cut through like a stick through water. Rhent felt his hands go weak.

“Kaern... what else can you tell me? About finding these... these guards? If we can figure out who hired them...”

“Them? They weren’t all that special....”

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Whoever this guard was, he put up more of a fight than the others.

Sera grunted as she rolled out of the way of his blow, the oversized quicksilver baton raking a long gash into the floor. Enormously tall, the guard’s muscles practically bulged out from underneath the slate-grey plasteel plating of his armor, his breath hissing ragged and menacing from underneath his full trooper’s helm. Sera hissed right back. Unfortunately for him, her ground-game was excellent.

Twisting on her back, the Zabrak brought her legs to bare, slamming three harsh kicks into the side of his knee. The first bent it slightly; the third collapsed it with a terrible crack, and the man crumpled to his knees, his roaring turning into groans of pain. Wrenching her core, Sera shot her legs into the air, gripping either side of his head with her feet. When he tried to raise his

extended baton, the huntress shot one hand out, hand clutching around it in an amplified grip. The other shot into his gut, lightsaber igniting.

The guard's groan died into a gargle as he collapsed, his spinal cord severed. He gave two words as he breathed his last, mournful in his failure.

"Ghafa... I am sorry."

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"Ghafa Ordam... " Rhent whispered, mind dark.

Capital Enterprises. The Collective. Things were worse than he had feared.

"She sounds nice?" Sera supplied, breaking into his musings. SOmehow, he even managed a chuckle.

"Hardly. But... I think I may have a new job for you... maybe with a little less talking, this time."